

To Catch a Kiwi

Relocating kiwi threatened by clearance can be a dismal business. For a start, you can never be sure that the captured birds will safely settle into a new home, and you are always left with lingering doubts about whether you have rescued every kiwi. But the overwhelming feeling is one of futility as prime native habitat and unique animals are swept away — for what? Farmers saddled with high interest rates producing goods the world doesn't want. Here North Taranaki branch chairman and farmer Peter Winter takes a wry look at his recent involvement in kiwi relocation.

By torchlight the crown of a ponga at one's feet gives the illusion of solid ground. The noise created by proving it is not could convince a kiwi it is time to go. The accompanying fall is rarely direct, but is cushioned by spiky branches, dead fronds, bush lawyer and finally lycopodium and copious dust or water, depending on

the state of the weather at the moment.

In August, 1981, I was invited to take part in an attempt to relocate kiwi from a mere 50 hectares of manuka on Mohakatino Station, a Lands and Survey farm development block in North Taranaki. A Wildlife officer gave me a canvas bag to carry the kiwi.

The capture area was a delightful spot

above a waterfall where the steep hillsides were clothed in manuka nearing the end of its natural life-span. In the gullies and wet areas were masses of tree ferns including an impressive group of *Cyathea cunninghamii*, while on the ridges tiny orchids — *Caladenia*, *Pterostylis*, *Thelymitra* — were in flower and sun dew set its sticky globules to catch insects, thus giving it nourishment to survive in the nitrogen-poor soil. Most of the ground was carpeted in lycopodium tall enough for a kiwi to stand unseen.

On the first night the objectives were to establish the presence of kiwi and estimate their numbers. The estimates ranged from seven to 12. We settled on nine, about half of them females, as a reasonable compromise, but it was likely there were pairs of birds in their own long-established territories. We drove home in the dawn.

No one broke a leg

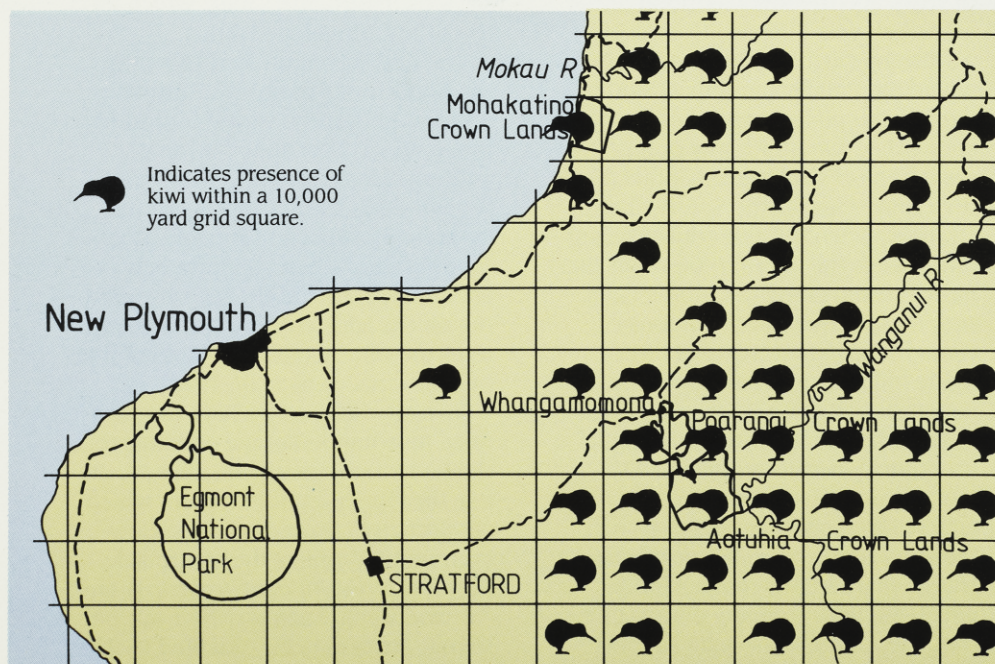
We made five visits in all. The number of kiwi-catchers ranged from 10 on one night to four. We used our own initiatives and theories, we mimicked kiwi calls and learned to distinguish the real from the false, but we did not catch kiwi. In fact nobody even saw one. It was surprising given the terrain and darkness that no one broke a leg, or a neck.

It was cold in the spring of 1981 and sometimes wet, but there was an abundance of manuka firewood to hand. The locality of each waiting, listening group was identifiable by the position of its fire, while forays in search of birds were visible because of bobbing torchlight which vanished and reappeared.

Since our visits were at weekends or at night we did not see the scrub-cutters and in spite of the evidence of their presence never really came to terms with what was about to happen. We made jokes about being careless with our fires and "cutting out the middle man", but as we watched the small birds, pied tits, fantails, greywarblers and occasional bellbirds and tuis it did not occur to us they too would die in the flames.



A peaceful setting for the land clearance that was to take place soon after. The photograph shows the waterfall at the entrance to the clearance site at Mohakatino, just south of the Mokau River. Photo: Peter Winter



Map based on The Atlas of Bird Distribution in New Zealand, Wildlife Service and DSIR surveys (1981 and 1985 respectively).



Prime kiwi habitat at Mohakatino after the scrub cutters. Photo: Peter Winter

I can remember returning a peripatus to its home in a rotting log. I may as well have crunched it under my heel.

On election night, 1981, some of our party stayed at a sort of base camp under a gnarled mahoe with a portable radio, but