



Female Snares Island snipe with a day-old chick. The chicks leave the nest within a few hours of hatching.

distinguish the sexes, age of first breeding, and chick growth rates. Continuing research should reveal factors that limit population density and those that contribute to breeding success.

Populations at risk

As a species, the New Zealand snipe is presently found in four island groups, on at least 15 islands and stacks; yet each of the distinctive subspecies is vulnerable to extinction should rats, cats, wekas or other vermin become established on their island retreats. Four populations have been eliminated in the last 120 years (although the population on Mangere Island has been re-established).

The animal that presents the greatest threat to remaining snipe populations is the ship rat. The biggest worry is the possibility of a large rat-infested vessel being wrecked on any of the islands. Of particular concern are the squid boats currently working south of New Zealand.

The threat of rat invasion from small coastal fishing vessels mooring close offshore is well publicised for The Snares, but is of equal concern for populations on the Chatham Islands. Ensuring that these boats remain rat-free requires the co-operation of their operators, including maintenance of bait stations and precautions to prevent rats getting aboard before departure for the fishing grounds.

The third possible means by which rodents could reach snipe islands is among expeditions stores. All the islands supporting snipe are administered by the Department of Lands & Survey, and landing permits include strict controls to prevent the introduction of alien plants and animals. It is the responsibility of the expedition leader to ensure that the permit conditions are satisfied.

The Future

The first objective of any management policy concerning snipe should be to ensure their survival as members of the unmodified ecosystems to which they belong. However, the small and vulnerable population of Snares Island snipe could disappear

very rapidly if alien predators ever become established on The Snares. Efforts should be made to establish further populations of this snipe on suitable islands off Stewart Island. It is easier to catch snipe *before* rats or other predators get a chance.

The only introduced mammal that snipe are known to be able to maintain a healthy population alongside is the house mouse. This greatly reduces the number of islands that are suitable for snipe transfer, as even those islands supporting kiore populations must be excluded. Weka eradication schemes may allow reintroduction of snipe to some islands where they were known or

thought to occur, e.g. Jacky Lee and Solander Islands.

Keeping snipe in captivity may be a safeguard against colonisation of snipe islands by predators, especially if there is a time lapse between the establishment of the predator, its discovery, and the commencement of rescue operations. Captive rearing is also the only feasible way that members of the public could observe these fascinating relicts of our prehistoric biota. 🦆

Colin Miskelly is carrying out research towards a PhD, based at University of Canterbury, and has been studying snipe on The Snares and Chatham Islands for the past four years. Colin has been an active member of the Ornithological Society for over ten years, and has carried out fieldwork throughout New Zealand and its offshore and outlying islands. His work is funded by the Department of Lands & Survey, with assistance from the Forest & Bird Society.

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