

a thousand years, its internal parasites reveal organisms related to Filariasis (Elephantiasis) confirming its tropical oceanic origins.

Though much of the island was subjected to repeated burn-offs some valleys of remnant forest dominated by pohutukawa survived.

Some of these are enormous — one old giant was considered to be the largest living example of its genre. After a recent storm this old giant virtually collapsed under its own weight with a massive branch tearing itself off from the trunk. The tree was thought to be a couple of hundred years old but when Neil Mitchell cut open the detached branch to confirm this he was startled to detect from growth rings that the branch was at least 700 years old — giving the tree itself an estimated age of between 1000 to 1200 years.

Even more interestingly the growth rings revealed a sudden pause in the tree's growth pattern lasting about 100 years.




Fisherman Bay, where 200 penguins come to nest. Photo: Gordon Ell.

This 100-year period coincided with the years of bush clearances and burn-offs.

Had the venerable old giant gone into some form of shock as the forest surrounding it was destroyed in the infernos?

The grand finale of any Tiri visit is the walk from the lighthouse/nursery complex to the wharf through what is known as "Wattle Track". This area of regenerating bush dominated by the Australian wattle supports an amazing amount of bird life during this tree's lengthy flowering period. If you have walked through the remaining great forests on the mainland and reflected upon their almost eerie silence the absolute din of chiming bellbirds in the wattles is a revelation. This area is important also for the island's tuis and saddlebacks.

Tiri's bellbirds are another interesting feature of this remarkable island. Extinct in most of northern New Zealand for much of this century, the birds survived only on some of the most isolated outer Gulf islands and for some strange reason on Tiritiri Matangi. That such a small patch of what can only be described as "scrub" can support so much birdlife is a stark reminder of the lethal damage done to this country's wildlife by introduced predators.


Nevertheless, the resounding success of the Tiritiri Matangi 'Open Sanctuary' has proved that the tide of destruction can be halted and indeed in some circumstances rolled back. 

Mike Lee is past chairman of Forest and Bird's Waiheke Section.

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