



Top: Quite different coloration sets the Mahoenui giant weta apart from its relatives. Like other northern-dwelling wetas, the Mahoenui lives in trees. The further south they occur, the closer they live to the ground. Photo: Brian Enting

Left: The only known habitat for the Mahoenui giant weta is this 300 ha expanse of gorse on King Country farmland. While the giant weta now appears to be surviving in this recent habitat, it is still very vulnerable — it would take only one disaster such as a fire to destroy the whole species. Photo: Alison Ballance

Right: Kaikoura giant wetas have been found in the last few years in rotten logs, scattered across scrubby farmland, at several sites on the Kaikoura coast. The wetas are at risk from predation by rats, trampling by stock, and the deliberate use of fire to clear pastures. Photo: Alison Ballance

### Mahoenui Giant Weta

Until the 1960s it was thought that all of the mainland populations of giant wetas were probably extinct. Then, in 1962, a teacher from the school at Mahoenui, in the King Country, contacted Entomology Division DSIR about an unusual black weta from a local farm. Three more wetas were found later that year, and the species was initially identified as *Deinacrida heteracantha*, the species that is found on Little Barrier Island. However, subsequent examinations revealed differences in size, behaviour and physical characteristics that show it is clearly a separate, but as yet unnamed, species.

Between 1962 and 1986 only a handful of giant wetas was found at Mahoenui. The wetas were hiding in gorse, rotten tree stumps and a hollow ponga in several small tawa forest remnants, and in an area of pine trees and mature gorse. By 1986, many of these sites had been cleared for farmland, and it began to look as if the population could be on the verge of extinction. The outlook for the giant weta population at