

# WHO IS HELPING HOIHO, THE YELLOW-

*"Penguins just a mile from here?"  
The American's laconic attitude  
suddenly changed; this was  
something different! . . .*

I was speaking to him amidst the bleak desolation of a native forest clearing operation in eastern Southland. He was selling a log hauler to the chipmill company, I was selling conservation. He was having more success. The idea of penguins living in a forest was completely new to him however, and I gathered that he had always thought of them as cute creatures standing on ice floes or adorning Christmas cards.

We both learned some things from our brief talk: he about our unique yellow-eyed penguins and me about the potential interest in the bird by people from the penguin-less northern hemisphere. However, our talk did little to help the penguins and the forest destruction went on, fueled by the chipmill's demands and farmers' need for more land.

## Bush-felling binge

That was some years ago, at a time when government incentives for farm development were encouraging a bush-felling binge of historic proportions. Today the chipmill still demands the forest, but in eastern Southland at least, there are fewer owners willing to provide it. Even the local people have become alarmed by the rate of forest loss. As well as this, after years of neglect,

something is at last being done about the yellow-eyed penguin. Concerned people in the south are working and gearing up for a massive effort to save this rarest penguin in the world, and certainly one of the most unusual.

What makes it so extraordinary? The yellow-eyed penguin, or "hoiho" (Maori meaning "noise-shouter"), is found only in New Zealand waters and is not closely related to the world's 15 other penguin species. One of its most obvious peculiarities is that instead of congregating in closely packed breeding colonies like other penguins, it prefers to seek out solitary nesting places in coastal forest and scrub, sometimes more than one kilometre from the coast. So compelling is this drive for solitude, a pair of hoiho will usually fail to breed successfully if they are within sight of another pair's nest.

Hoiho is the biggest of New Zealand's five native penguin species. It grows to about 60 centimetres long, is grey with a typical pure white underside and has a handsome band of yellow feathers behind its yellow eyes. Its attractive colouration and size is well described by its scientific name: *Megadyptes antipodes*, meaning "big diver from the Antipodes". Its present population is estimated to be about 5000. It breeds along the south-east coast of the South Island from Moeraki to Bluff, as well as on Stewart Island and the sub-Antarctic Auckland and Campbell islands. Unlike other penguins it is sedentary, living near its breeding grounds all year. Only the fledged juveniles travel north up to 500 kilometres to winter feeding grounds.

## Greatest threat

The greatest threat to the survival of hoiho is on the mainland where nesting sites in

forest and coastal scrub have been cleared for farms. Besides removing the birds' hiding places, the clearance has encouraged predators. Rats, wild cats, stoats, ferrets and dogs all pose a hazard. The chicks are at most risk, although stoats, dogs, and unfortunately even humans have killed adult birds, most commonly during their vulnerable three-week moulting period in autumn. Even on offshore islands hoiho is not secure from introduced carnivores. On Stewart Island, cats are a menace, while rats, cats and pigs are present on the main Auckland Island and rats and cats roam Campbell Island.

Some individual efforts have been made to help hoiho. These range from the Jones's penguin "hospital" at Moeraki in North Otago, to the Southland Forest and Bird Society's Te Rere penguin reserve project. It has become apparent however that greater co-ordination is needed. In response to this need, the Department of Conservation has produced a draft species recovery plan. Also, a Yellow-eyed Penguin Trust has been set up by concerned individuals, its aim being to co-ordinate efforts to reverse the decline in numbers of the bird.

One person who can take a major portion of the credit for the recent highlighting of hoiho's plight is John Darby. John, an ornithologist who works for the Otago Museum in Dunedin, has led research into the birds' numbers and habits, taking up where pioneer researcher, Lance Richdale, left off more than 40 years ago.

John's enthusiasm has encouraged others and he has co-ordinated a much needed census of the mainland population. We now have a good knowledge of the distribution of the 41 breeding areas on the coast, and we also have clear knowledge of the crisis the bird faces with a low and rapidly declin-



The lighthouse at Moeraki Point has become a beacon of survival for many yellow-eyed penguins. Janice (pictured) and Bob Jones are honorary rangers who have been rescuing sick and starving penguins and nursing them back to health in a swimming pool donated by Forest and Bird. Starvation may be caused partly by the El Nino weather phenomenon, which has affected the oceanic food chain. Because squid is a favoured food for juveniles, questions are also being asked about whether foreign fleets are depriving the bird of this vital fish.