

# KIWICIDE IN WAITANGI

## Recollections of a nightmare

*How vulnerable is a substantial kiwi population to a marauding dog? Who would guess a single dog can do more than moderate harm, at most, to a population of nearly 1000 birds? A dramatic event in Northland's Waitangi State Forest last year taught a different lesson:*

*A German shepherd killed probably about 500 kiwi within a few weeks, or perhaps months. Without the incidental surveillance of two dozen birds by radio tracking, the largest brown kiwi population ever counted would now most likely be extinct.*

*Dr Michael Taborsky reports on the tragedy.*



In winter 1985 Barbara Hudde and I set out to study the extraordinary reproductive biology of kiwi in the wild. Waitangi Forest was the obvious location for this work. It is very accessible throughout, had a large and well documented kiwi population and even a number of banded birds. Detailed behavioural and spatial monitoring could additionally increase our knowledge on how kiwi cope with life in an exotic pine forest. From 1985 Barbara Hudde and I and an increasing number of helpful students came all the way every year to exchange a gentle Austrian summer sun for the cold and moist New Zealand winter nights to chase these secretive creatures, get stuck in heavy undergrowth, scratched by protuberant gorse, sink in hidden swamp holes and search for innumerable hours for kiwis with faulty transmitters. The joy of working with these exceptional birds more than compensated for these inconveniences.

### Pleasure vanished

The pleasure vanished when on 24 August 1987 we found a dead kiwi on a routine check of birds with transmitters. She was a massive female which once had weighed almost 4 kg, the biggest bird ever caught in this forest. At home, close inspection revealed that she was killed by a dog. She had bruises and dents in the skin, some defeath-



Top: A North Island brown kiwi in Waitangi Forest. Kiwi have been counted in high numbers in these pine forests, and one of the aims of the author's research was to understand how the birds cope with living in such forests. A transmitter is attached to this kiwi's leg.

Above: The first dead kiwi found was the biggest female ever caught in Waitangi Forest. Inspection of the carcass revealed she had been mauled by a dog.

ered areas and two little open wounds on a foot. Clotted blood was in her beak. We could interpret this symptom from our own experience with training a dog for kiwi capture. Tui, a young and still inexperienced Labrador retriever, once grabbed a kiwi and lifted it up for part of a second. Even though she released the bird immediately on my command, the poor bird, a young male, was bleeding from its beak. Fortunately he recovered but he breathed noisily for weeks and initially lost 14 percent of his body weight. This was an impressive demonstration of the delicacy of kiwi respiratory tracts.

We were upset about the dead bird but suspected the culprit was only a dog being walked in the forest, as the killing happened on a weekend and close to a good walking track. I reported the incident to the Department of Conservation (DOC) Wellington. On 9 September we found a second kiwi corpse. We informed the local manager of Timberlands, the company in charge of the forest since the cessation of the Forest Service. Timberlands alerted the local press on 16 September, after we had found two more dead kiwi.

The district office of DOC in Whangarei took responsibility for fighting the marauding dog, in coordination with local authorities and the Timberlands' management in