

“**N**OTHING IN CONNECTION with the naturalisation of wild animals into New Zealand has caused so much heartburning and controversy as the introduction of these blood thirsty creatures”. So wrote G.M Thomson in 1922 about the 1890s Government introduction of mustelids (ferrets, stoats and weasels) to control the rabbit nuisance. Even then some Acclimatisation Societies warned of the disastrous consequences, as did many of the senior conservationists of the day.

One hundred years on after the release of large numbers of mustelids in Otago, rabbits still threaten farming viability, showing just how ineffective mustelids were. However, mustelids soon found easy pickings among New Zealand's flightless or ground-dwelling birds – so much so that the predators appeared in Fiordland before rabbits! Fortunately they did not reach everywhere. Most offshore islands are free of mustelids and DSIR reports in the 1940s and 1960s showed large parts of the mainland – such as Northland – to be ferret-free.

But a little over five years ago the fitch industry was founded. Environmental concerns were dismissed with the claim that ferrets were so valuable no farmer would allow any to escape but reports of dead kiwis showing all the classic signs of ferret predation started coming from Dargaville. Ferrets were starting to escape.

Fitch Market Crashed

As with any industry it is necessary to supply what the market wants. The fitch industry failed to do this because it was breeding the wrong type of fitch. Anticipated returns were well down. Then the grossly oversupplied market crashed. You couldn't give fitch away in 1987. World production toppled from 600,000 to 200,000 that year and in New Zealand many farmers went bankrupt. A number simply opened up their doors and let their whole stock loose.

Eight hundred animals from one farm bordering Mamaku Conservation Park, home of the precious kokako, were let go straight into the Park. Nine farms operated in this area and seven of these folded. What happened to the other animals is speculation. Our stall at the Mystery Creek Agricultural Fieldays was inundated with stories of poultry attacks, loss of game and native birds. From Wanganui to Warkworth came reports of 11 farms releasing part or all of their stock and six farms still in operation but losing stock regularly.

Opposite: Ferrets – no friend to native birds since their introduction in the 1890s. The fine for releasing any number of ferrets into the wild is a farcical \$100.

One of the worst farms that Acclimatisation Society officers have come across is this one in the Waikato. Note the insanitary conditions, with waste piled a metre high, holes in the netting, a beer crate holding the door closed and plastic sheeting for walls.



Contrary to regulations, fitch farms such as these have little in the way of security. Animals are supposed to be enclosed in a building as well as in cages.

