

Project Taranaki Kokako

MORE THAN 100 DAYS of slogging it out through Taranaki forests very early in the morning and endless repetitions of taped kokako call have proved vital ingredients for the survival of endangered kokako in the region.

The Department of Conservation (DoC) in Taranaki has undertaken extensive kokako surveys from October 1987 to May 1988 and again from September last year to this February with the rather alarming conclusion that remaining populations there will probably die out unless factors working against their survival are actively managed.

The co-ordinator of Project Taranaki Kokako, the department's Janice Molloy, has developed a genuine love of the attractive dark birds with their blue wattles and distinctive song through weeks spent in the bush tracking them, but it is affection heavily accented with concern for their survival.

In a report detailing the outcome of the project, she makes strong recommendations which, if implemented, will make Taranaki one of only about four locations where kokako "research by management" programmes will be carried out. The Taranaki kokako population is particularly important because it represents the southern-most limit of the species. And along with that, the result of her management programmes will help design others for kokako populations elsewhere in the North Island, where the birds were once widely found.

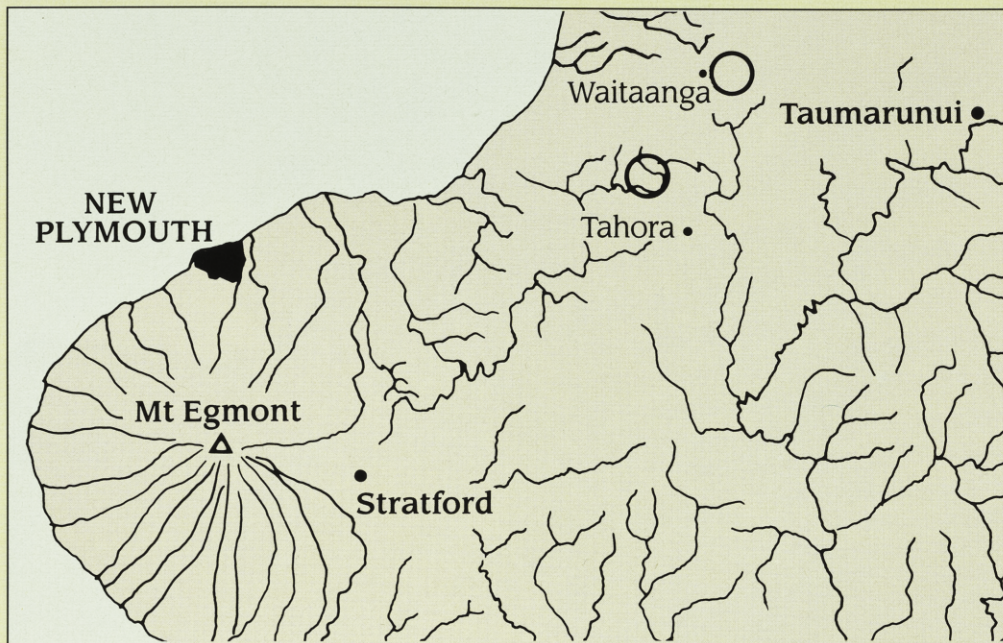
The recently completed surveys aimed to determine the location and approximate number of kokako remaining in Taranaki and were concentrated in forests where kokako had been reported in the last 15 years, using extra sightings from forest users such as possum trappers, pig hunters, goat shooters, trampers and farmers. At the final count, 27 kokako territories were found. Four of those were confirmed to hold pairs, with a resulting total of 31 individual birds located in two main areas – the upper Waitara River (in the Moki and Makino forests) and in the northern Waitaanga forest.

Janice Molloy believes, however, that the numbers found provide an underestimate of real numbers, mainly because the walk-through surveys used don't detect all kokako in an area. The work went well and DoC completed the job it set out to do, but there's a lot more left, she sighs.

"We'll be going back in this spring and summer to carry out territorial mapping, which gives a much more accurate indication of how many kokako are in the population and we will also be carrying out juvenile searches to determine the productivity of the birds."

Petrocorp, which sponsored the project with a \$10,000 grant, has now confirmed that it will continue to support Project Taranaki Kokako during the next phase.

Accepting even so that DoC is unlikely to have enough money to manage both major kokako populations in Taranaki, she recom-



The areas circled show the forests where most Taranaki kokako have been found.



Intrepid kokako researcher Janice Molloy and her novel mode of back country travel.

mends the larger, in the upper Waitara River, be selected for management, while the Waitaanga population is used as a control, with its future management to be reviewed once the numbers in the other territories are more accurately known.

A series of recommendations spanning five years means later management will depend on the effectiveness of the first years, with an overall objective of increasing territorial adult kokako in the upper Waitara area by controlling browsing mammals such as possums and goats. The troublesome possums, ever hungry for much of the same food the kokako eat, should be reduced by at least 70 percent in the first year of that time, while goat control must be continued intensively for similar reasons, Janice stresses.

Her recommendations are:

- That territorial mapping of both populations be carried out in the next year to determine absolute numbers;
- Privately-owned forest containing kokako should be protected (11 of the 31 birds found in Taranaki inhabit private forest);
- The public should be kept informed of progress. People generally had been very supportive of the kokako project and supplied a mass of information about present and past distribution, Janice says.
- Further sightings of kokako in the neighbouring Whanganui National Park should also be sought from the public, following several reports from the area. 🦜

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