



Mice vs Mana

Mana Island has been plagued by mice since they arrived with European farmers in 1834. After a long and chequered farming history which saw the virtual clearance of the original forest, the island then became an exotic sheep quarantine and breeding research station, and later a cattle research farm. Stock were removed from the island in May 1986. When the stock were removed the mice population exploded due to the increased food supply, especially of grass seed.

Action had to be taken swiftly to stop the burgeoning mice epidemic. Mice destroy the seed, fruit and seedlings of many native plants found on the island, inhibiting natural regeneration; they also clean out the poison bait set in case rats come ashore, compromising DoC's ability to keep the island rat-free; they eat bird and lizard eggs and about 75 percent of their diet is comprised of insects, which would otherwise be eaten by

birds. Several rare and endangered animals were threatened: the Cook Strait giant weta (*Deinacrida rugosa*), whose sole North Island refuge is Mana Island; McGregor's skink (*Cyclodina macgregori*) and the gold-striped gecko (*Hoplodactylus chrysosireticus*); and a number of seabirds which nest on Mana such as the little blue penguin and sooty shearwater. Finally, large concentrations of mice can cause disease.

Mouse eradication could also open the way for Mana to become an important island refuge for other threatened species such as the North Island saddleback or the takahe, provided the newcomers are compatible with resident animals.

The Mouse Busters

Much of the credit for the Mana mice massacre goes to Colin Ryder, deputy chairman of Forest and Bird's Wellington branch. The spur to Colin was the February 1988 issue of *For-*

est & Bird, which contained an article about rat eradication in Fiordland's Breaksea Island. While the notion of clearing Mana of mice had been discussed for some years, it was not until Colin took it up as part of a proposal for a Conservation Corps programme that it got off the ground. The Corps scheme is a personal development/work scheme funded by the Government and launched in October 1988 to provide conservation work for school leavers and young adults.

In late October 1988 the idea was discussed among Forest and Bird's five Wellington branches (Kapiti, Mana, Lower and Upper Hutt and Wellington), then floated before the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR). They were asked to give an estimate of the cost of the ambitious project. Two weeks later a Conservation Corps application for funding the Mana scheme and 12 other local conservation projects was presented to the Department of Labour by Forest