



The Chatham Island Black Robin

How the world's most endangered bird was saved from extinction



By 1980 only five Chatham Island black robins remained. The story of the daring bid to rescue the bird from extinction is as dramatic a conservation tale as any in the world. Here Don Merton, the chief architect of the plan, gives a full account and brings readers up to date with the robins' progress.

THE CHATHAM ISLAND BLACK ROBIN is endemic to that land apart – the wind-swept cluster of islands 850 km east of the South Island we refer to as the Chathams group. Once widespread on the islands, the robin together with many other native birds disappeared from the larger islands following European colonisation early last century.

Forests and scrubland were cleared, and rats and cats introduced. Seven bird species were exterminated. Miraculously however, a remnant black robin population of about 20-30 birds persisted for the subsequent 90 years in 5-7 hectares of scrub forest on top of a 200 metre sheer-sided rock stack – Little Mangere Island.

Little Mangere is rarely visited, so extremely difficult is it to climb. However, in 1938 the late Sir Charles Fleming, Alan Wutherspoon and Graeme Turbott scaled the cliffs and rediscovered the black robin there.

In the 1970s the woody vegetation atop Little Mangere degenerated rapidly following the clearing of a helicopter landing pad. The robin population plummeted from 18 birds in 1973 to seven (two pairs and three males) in 1976, when the Wildlife Service relocated the survivors on nearby 130 ha-Mangere Island. Prior to this 120,000 trees had been planted on Mangere to provide additional habitat for

the robins and other native wildlife – a programme heavily sponsored by the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society.

Teetered on the Brink

During the final three years on Little Mangere only one robin chick had survived to breeding age. Although chick survival improved following the transfer (5 chicks in 4 years) the skewed age-structure of the population meant that recruitment of young was offset by natural mortality of old birds. Unaided, no rapid recovery was possible and the species teetered on the brink of extinction; an urgent remedy was required.

In common with some other New Zealand endemics, black robins tend to be long lived and to have a low reproductive rate: the normal clutch size is just two eggs and a successful nesting cycle takes more than three months. Thus, the species lacks the ability to recover quickly when its population is reduced. However, because black robins are capable of reneesting, their potential productivity is greater. For this reason in 1979 when the species had declined to just five birds, I proposed cross-fostering as means of capitalising upon this potential – to boost productivity and so quickly restore the population to a viable level.

Old Yellow (above), Old Blue's mate from 1979-83. At the time the photo was taken Old Yellow was – unbeknown to wildlife officers – the only effective breeder of the two male robins in existence. Photo: Rod Morris.