



A weka chick peeks out at the world from the safety of its parent's back. Weka chicks remain with their parents for up to four months. Photos: Geoff Moon

than most of our native birds. They can kill rats and mice, and rout cats, stoats or weasels in defence of their eggs and chicks. Despite this, predation must always be a problem for a ground-nesting bird.

Disease

It is widely held that introduced poultry disease caused the sudden decline in weka numbers. This may account for the population collapses this century, and the abrupt appearances and disappearances of local populations last century. These declines could also be attributed to starvation, perhaps linked to drought. No hard evidence or diagnosis exists.

Many attempts have been made to re-establish weka in the North Island. Most of these releases failed. An important factor may have been the remarkable homing instinct of the adult weka.

A weka taken from Gisborne to Hawkes Bay walked 130 km home. Captured Gisborne weka were banded and released in the Waitakere Ranges, west of Auckland. Three weeks later, one of these banded birds was killed on the road at Taneatua, more than 300 km south of Auckland, and on course for Gisborne! Weka taken from Maud Island swam a kilometre back to the island, and some of those deported from Codfish Island to Stewart Island, survived the stormy seas and tide rip and swam the three kilometres back!

Such powerful homing instincts may have

sabotaged the crude re-introductions of wild captured, adult birds. A more sophisticated release succeeded at Rawhiti, in the Bay of Islands. Robertson liberated weka in the summers of 1966 to 1971, and accustomed the wild birds to their new surroundings by penning them for six weeks at the release site. More than 20 years later, the Rawhiti weka are established and extending their range.

At present, the North Island weka occurs as a natural population in Poverty Bay, and as introduced populations at Rawhiti, Kawau Island, Mokoia Island (Lake Rotorua) and Arid Island. In 1986, in its stronghold in Poverty Bay, the wekas suffered a massive decline, and as much as 90 percent of the population disappeared. The population now appears to be increasing, but research is urgently needed to replace the speculation.

Will the North Island weka, like so many of our endemic birds, dwindle to endangered status, or even to extinction?

Return of the Weka

Forest and Bird has researched the North Island weka and consider it has potential for careful re-establishment in selected habitats.

First, we are initiating a captive breeding programme to produce a pool of young adults suitable for establishing a new population. This will avoid taking excessive numbers of wild birds from an already stressed population, and young, non-territorial birds will be more suitable to liberate

in new habitat.

This summer Forest and Bird members and Department of Conservation officers will conduct weka surveys to establish population levels, before capturing weka pairs for breeding. Pairs will be distributed to approved breeders.

While the captive weka population is building up potential release sites will be evaluated and the ecology of weka studied further. If the project succeeds the weka may return to enliven the forests of its former haunts. 🦜

Weka breeders wanted

MEMBERS INTERESTED in bird rearing may wish to take part in the Captive Rearing Programme. Participants must have a suitable aviary and obtain from DoC a permit to hold protected wildlife in captivity.

Further details are available from conservation officers Ann and Basil Graeme, 53 Princess Road, Tauranga (075) 65593.