

KIWI RECOVERY UNDERWAY



Brown kiwi pair at the nest. Photo: Rod Morris, DoC

Concerns for the future of kiwi have led the Department of Conservation to launch a Kiwi Recovery Programme in partnership with Forest and Bird and the Bank of New Zealand. This article summarises DoC's Kiwi Recovery Plan and was compiled by Estelle Sarney.

IMAGINE NEW ZEALAND without the kiwi. It's unthinkable, but that tragedy has become possible. This unique bird, whose origins go back 70 million years, has become New Zealand's national symbol, yet few of the self-proclaimed human 'kiwis' have ever seen one in the wild or heard their call. Now the chances of such contact are becoming increasingly remote – the kiwi is threatened with possible extinction. Scientists have noticed the forests becoming quieter. In many areas that used to ring at night with the shrill, quavering call of the kiwi the morepork now calls alone.

We may have adopted the kiwi to represent ourselves, but we have also unwittingly triggered its decline. The kiwi is on the run in its own country from introduced predators and land clearance. Sometime in the past thirty years one of the three species of kiwi, the little spotted kiwi, became extinct on the mainland. It is a measure of how little we know about our national bird that the disappearance of this species went largely unnoticed. It is now exiled to Kapiti and other offshore islands, classified as not just threatened but endangered.

The other two species, the great spotted

kiwi and the brown kiwi, and the three sub-species of brown kiwi, the North Island, South Island and Stewart Island varieties, are considered threatened. A five year kiwi recovery programme has been launched recently by the Department of Conservation. The recovery programme is a Threatened Species Trust project sponsored by the Bank of New Zealand in partnership with the Department of Conservation and the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society.

This recovery plan presents a five-year programme of research and management aimed at a long term goal of maintaining and, where possible, enhancing the current abundance, distribution and genetic diversity of kiwis.

All kiwi species are included in this one plan because all are considered threatened with extinction unless the causes of declines are addressed. The little spotted kiwi is at particular risk and is classified as endangered. The establishment of populations on offshore islands and perhaps in captivity may continue to be necessary for those species in the most immediate danger, but this plan aims to retain kiwis on the mainland. It recognises that in the long run the best way of pre-

serving the diversity of New Zealand's flora and fauna is to conserve species as part of the community in which they have evolved.

Introducing the kiwi

Kiwi are the smallest members of the ratites, a group of flightless birds which includes the rheas of South America, the cassowaries of Australia and New Guinea, and the ostriches of Africa. They are endemic to New Zealand and ancient in origin; their ancestor, which may also have spawned the moas, probably arrived in New Zealand some 70 million years ago.

Kiwis are biological oddities, unique in both appearance and behaviour. Many of their features are more typical of mammals than birds, with some scientists referring to them as New Zealand's honorary mammals. Kiwis hold a variety of records among birds; their eggs are extremely large and rich in energy, and take an exceedingly long time to hatch. Males are the smaller of the two sexes and perform most of the parental care, which is unusual for a monogamous bird.

The kiwi genus *Apteryx* is truly a "one-off" design, and it is not surprising, then, that kiwis have become an important part