



The Stephens Island gecko

Elusive but not extinct

What do you do when one of the world's rarest lizards appears to be living mainly in a vigorously invading weed that must be eradicated from a wildlife sanctuary? Alison Cree investigates.

FOR A WILDLIFE sanctuary, Stephens Island has seen extensive human activity over the last few hundred years. Captain Cook sailed past the island, lying on the northern edge of the Marlborough Sounds, in 1769 and named it after a Secretary of the British Admiralty. Maori tribes from the South Island visited it periodically for its rich titi (seabird) harvest, but probably never lived there permanently.

Then, between 1892 and 1894, a lighthouse was built at the northern end of the island, and the island has been permanently inhabited by up to three families ever since. In addition, numerous field parties of biologists have periodically roamed the island to study its super-abundant population of tuatara, estimated to number at least 30,000.

Given this level of human activity, it is astonishing that the island's rarest reptile, the Stephens Island gecko *Hoplodactylus stephensi*, was not discovered until the late 1950s. About that time, natural history writer Richard Sharell visited the island and found several specimens of a small, slender gold-and-brown striped gecko that differed slightly from the common gecko, *Hoplodactylus maculatus*, which is abundant on the island and elsewhere in New Zealand.

Over the next few years a few more of the inconspicuous new species were seen, but it was not until 1980 that it was officially described. By 1989, only about 30 sightings had been made, and still almost nothing was known of the gecko's biology. And one of the few facts known was a disturbing one. Most recent sightings of this elusive, elegant gecko had

The Stephens Island gecko was unknown until about 30 years ago. Like the common gecko, which is also present on Stephens Island, it is most active at night.