



Fortunately, Stephens Island geckos are more abundant in the endemic *Muehlenbeckia australis* vinelands (shown here) than in the weed *Tradescantia*.

environment on Stephens Island.

Although it was rewarding to find Stephens Island geckos in this habitat, the species remains rare and is never seen as frequently as the common gecko. We estimated that the area of vineland in which we were searching may harbour about 600 Stephens Island geckos. Several other large areas of the vineland occur on the island and we now need to establish whether Stephens Island geckos survive in

all these isolated plots.

The good news is that relatively few Stephens Island geckos were seen in areas of *Tradescantia*. Intensive efforts by the Department of Conservation to control this weed are unlikely to pose a threat to the survival of the Stephens Island gecko, and are now proceeding with urgency and considerable success. Other conservation actions that should be carried out to benefit the species include:

- eventual re-planting of trees and vineland to connect what may now be isolated populations of Stephens Island geckos in Keeper's Bush and Ruston Bush; and
- increased encouragement of attempts at captive-breeding, so that the factors permitting successful reproduction can be identified and surplus animals bred to start new wild populations.

Perhaps the most exciting news is that the Stephens Island gecko is not just the "Stephens Island" gecko after all. In 1989, Patsy Garrett was among a party of ornithologists led by Brian Bell on Maud Island and sighted a slender, gold-and-brown striped gecko that closely resembled the Stephens Island gecko. This stimulated herpetologist Tony Whitaker to intensively search Maud Island, with positive results. Confirmation of *H. stephensi* on Maud Island has led Tony to suggest that the common name should be changed, and he has recommended "striped gecko" as an alternative.

The fact that only six Stephens Island geckos were seen in the Maud Island survey, however, when over 500 common geckos were sighted, means that the species is rare on that island also and must still be considered threatened. ♦

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