

◀ The North Island kokako is the only member of the ancient New Zealand wattle bird family still surviving on the mainland. Of its relatives, the huia is extinct, the South Island kokako is presumed extinct and the saddleback survives only on predator-free islands.

and the Department of Conservation late last year. The committee overseeing the administration of the plan includes representatives from Forest and Bird and the Forest Research Institute.

The aim of the recovery plan is:

- to protect key populations of kokako. These are populations which will contribute most significantly to the species' survival
- to carry out research that will help to understand the bird's complex ecology and habitat
- to evaluate current management techniques for kokako
- to use techniques such as island transfers and captive breeding to conserve remnant populations.

WHILE IT MIGHT seem obvious that predators and browsers are causing kokako to decline, the evidence is largely circumstantial. Kokako nests are notoriously hard to find. No one can say with certainty that kokako are declining because they aren't trying to nest (which would suggest that browsers are limiting food so therefore the birds can't get enough nourishment for reproduction), or that kokako are breeding but eggs, chicks, or adult birds are being killed by stoats, rats or other predators. Is one more important than the other?

Work at Rotoehu forest by John Innes (Forest Research Institute Rotorua), Paul Jansen (DoC Rotorua) and others will help answer these questions. Radio transmitters are being attached to adult birds, allowing workers to spy on the birds' nesting attempts (see *Forest & Bird* May 1990). In the first year, only one of five pairs attempted to breed – and the eggs in that nest were destroyed by an unknown predator. In the summer of 1990-91

twelve pairs did their best and made 16 attempts at producing clutches. Young kokako survived from just two nests and rats were usually responsible for the loss of the others. This summer only one nest was successful despite eight nest attempts.

Another objective is to develop the management methods which will allow kokako to keep on producing enough offspring to maintain populations. The task is very complex. Browsers and predators can switch roles, and management techniques can have unexpected effects. Browsing animals like possums may dip into a kokako nest for a quick feed. Poisons such as 1080, which target possums, are very effective against predatory rats. When rat is taken off the menu, a hungry stoat may increase the number of birds in its diet. Kokako do not cooperate either, and many frustrating hours can be spent tracking elusive parents and their offspring.

It takes highly motivated people to carry out the job of controlling goats, possums, mustelids and rodents in the

*The decline of the North Island kokako encapsulates the problems of wildlife conservation in New Zealand. This bird, of ancient lineage and haunting tone, is the only species of the endemic wattle bird family still living on the mainland. GRETCHEN RASCH looks at the recovery programme for the kokako's dwindling mainland populations.*

