WHAT WOULD WE LOSE if the New Zealand dotterels on Stewart Island died out? While the genetic work that would decide whether the Stewart Island birds are a separate sub-species has not been done, our study has shown that there are considerable differences between northern and southern birds. Most biologists and conservation managers agree that we should make every attempt to preserve such diversity, whether the differences are due to genetic or behavioural variation.

There is another important consideration – if we lose the southern population there will be a drastic reduction in the overall range of the species. A few New Zealand dotterels are seen wandering the South Island coast each year and some of these birds even reach Farewell Spit. Our banding studies suggest that these are juveniles from Stewart Island. If that population is allowed to die out, there will probably be no New Zealand dotterels south of Cook Strait.

What can we do? The draft recovery plan for the New Zealand dotterel suggests that the highest priority for work on the species should be to try and reverse the decline of the Stewart Island population. Our only practical option seems to be to control feral cats around Table Hill, the last remaining major breeding site. We know that some juveniles are still produced each season, suggesting that if we can reduce the adult mortality, the population will be able to recover. With this in mind we put forward a proposal to ring the area with poison bait stations to try and keep cat numbers in the vicinity as low as possible during the breeding season. This involved the use of a new long-life bait, developed specifically for DoC by the Forest Research Institute.

In September came the welcome news that DoC had decided that the cat-control programme should go ahead this season. We will be monitoring its effec-

The trials of fieldwork

Stewart Island is often spectacularly beautiful but conditions are not always ideal for fieldwork.

First there is the problem of access. There are no roads outside the area surrounding the village of Halfmoon Bay and the only practical and quick way of getting to remote parts of the island is by boat. Even then, many of the tops do not have tracks to them and progress through the dense manuka, leatherwood and inaka scrub is often slow.

After heavy rain, the going is likely to be even slower. Once on the tops, a lot of patience may be necessary, waiting for favourable weather.

Westerly gales and thick cloud swept Table Hill during a trip in December 1991, making surveys possible on only four of 17 days. Much of the time, visibility was less than 50 metres and the wind was strong enough to blow us over. There is little point in searching the tops in these conditions – any dotterels that don't have eggs or chicks to look after simply won't be there.

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▲ *Table Hill (foreground) is the last stronghold of the species on Stewart Island, with eight or nine pairs attempting to nest during the past season. Birds have steadily disappeared from other parts of the Tin Range (background) during our study. Unlike their northern counterparts, who usually nest on sandy beaches, the dotterels on Stewart Island nest in stunted sub-alpine vegetation, often among rocky outcrops.*

◀ *Unlike nests in the North Island, which are usually simple scrapes in the sand, New Zealand dotterel nests on Stewart Island are lined with tussock leaves and lichen. Normally only three eggs are laid and this unusually large clutch probably resulted when two females laid in the same nest.*