

KIWIS SEEKING KIWIS

New Zealand's national bird is in trouble. Surveys by the Department of Conservation show an alarming decline in many populations. But JUDITH DOYLE looks at one population of kiwi that appears to be doing fine.

YOU MAY HAVE tramped New Zealand bush tracks from one end of the country to the other. You may be an enthusiast for our flora and fauna, but chances are you've never seen a kiwi in the wild. Heard them, yes. But few Kiwis have seen their namesakes except in artificial environments.

And that is why the kiwi-spotting trips

run by fisherman, Phillip Smith, on Stewart Island are so popular, despite the unpredictability of wind and weather and the necessity to brave the elements at night in order to see the nocturnal kiwi.

On only one occasion, did his group fail to see kiwi, he claims. (He doesn't give the same guarantee in regard to the weather – a good strong westerly can put paid to his best-laid plans and the trips have to be cancelled at these times.)



B. HARCOURT/DOC



The kiwi-spotters are briefed before departure from Oban. Phillip Smith is on the left.

The secret of his kiwi-spotting success is seeking them on an isolated beach where their dark feathers are visible against the white sands, even at night. The birds come out on the beach to forage for sandhoppers which they find beneath the washed-up kelp.

The tours start at twilight from Golden Bay which is over the hill from Oban – Stewart Island's main settlement.

After crossing Paterson Inlet, that large slice of water that nearly divides the island, the kiwi-spotters head for a bay at the base of a narrow peninsula called The Neck.

Early last century sealers and whalers settled just north of this area, joining a long-established Maori community. But humans have long departed and the bush and the silence has reclaimed its own.

Often it is the kiwi that pierces this silence with its plaintive shrill call. Phillip Smith frequently hears them from the boat before he ties up. There is a sizeable wharf here, used in the early days as a