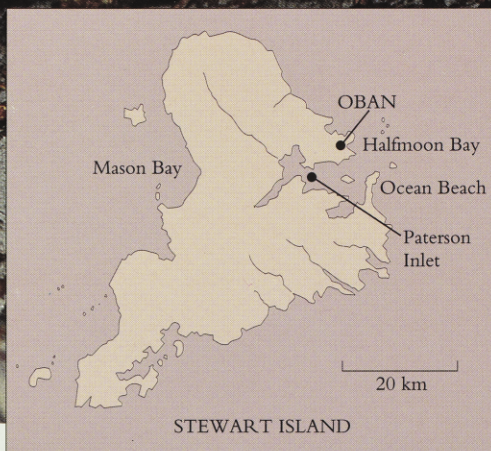




*A Stewart Island kiwi explores Ocean Beach in search of sandhoppers.*



working – they often come up and pick at his boots.

Andy Roberts of the Department of Conservation reports healthy populations of the bird in several areas of the island, as well as Ocean Beach. “It’s the healthiest kiwi population in New Zealand,” he said. “That is in numbers and in actual condition. At Mason Bay (on the opposite coast to Ocean Beach) where we did a kiwi study, we haven’t lost any birds that have been banded over the last five years.

“They are stropky little birds. They seem to be able to cope with the feral cats on the island and thankfully we have no stoats or weasels – they were not introduced in the early days as the island had no rabbits.”

He thinks the trips to Ocean Beach may well be scaring off these wild cats, while they do not seem to be affecting the kiwi who know a top class feeding area when they find one.

At a rough estimate, he gauges the

population of kiwi on the island at 20,000 from counts that have been made in different areas.

Phillip Smith is helping with a kiwi count by keeping records each night of the number he sees on his trips. During late winter, the kiwi seem more numerous as they become more vocal – this is the start of their mating season when their calls get more insistent. But by then the number of tourists in Stewart Island have dropped off.

One enthusiastic tourist, a fellow-guest in the lodge where I was staying, had been on a kiwi-spotting trip the night before. He spoke of his delight at seeing five adult kiwi and one chick. His only regret was that flash could not be used to photograph the birds in case it disturbed them and he had no photos to take back to the States.

Perhaps if more New Zealanders gained an appreciation of kiwi in the wild, then they would press for action needed to save kiwi on the mainland. Sensitive nature tourism opportunities such as Phillip Smith’s show the potential that can be realised if this country’s wildlife is able to thrive in accessible areas rather than be confined on off-shore island museums. ♦

### A kiwi concession

**P**HILLIP SMITH operates his tours under a concession from the Department of Conservation.

Leonie Hishon at DoC’s Invercargill office says that no problems have emerged with the kiwi-spotting trips, as the numbers of birds are, if anything, increasing.

But Phillip’s concession is currently up for renewal. Before it can be confirmed on a more permanent basis, questions such as optimum numbers, photographic restrictions plus long-term impact need to be monitored. However, DoC has not yet put in the monitoring work to assess risks and determine a total carrying capacity for visitors. A planned monitoring programme over summer never happened.

There is no indication that the population has declined, but the information is based on Phillip’s records. There is also no information on breeding success before and after the tours started.

There are a number of other operators interested in kiwi tours to Ocean Beach and other parts of the island such as Mason Bay, and DoC will need to decide on the total number to be granted concessions.

Forest and Bird feels that DoC needs to be more organised and rigorous before issuing concessions in relation to protected species. The department should also require concessionaires to carry out an interpretation programme as part of the concession. At present there are no such requirements.



*Judith Doyle is a Wellington-based freelance writer.*