

## Better news for Stewart Island's dotterels

THE CAT-CONTROL programme designed to protect the highly endangered New Zealand dotterel population on Stewart Island (see *Forest & Bird* November 1992) has just completed its pilot season.

Feral cats are the main threat to the birds, the only remaining members of the species breeding south of Hawke Bay. Last October about 200 bait stations were set up enclosing an area of about 2.5 sq km around Table Hill, and the baits and birds were checked each month through the season. By mid-February, all birds from the protected area had left the breeding grounds and moved to their coastal wintering flocks.

The results from the full annual census of the population

## Cattle stops kill kiwi

CATTLE STOPS, long identified in England as a source of danger to wildlife, have now been implicated in the deaths of kiwi in Northland.

An alert Forest and Bird member, holidaying north of Russell, came upon skeletons of three kiwi at the bottom of a deep cattle stop on the Purerua peninsula.

In Britain the native hedgehog was falling victim in exactly the same way. Tumbling in and unable to climb out, the animals were condemned to a slow death by starvation until a hedgehog rescue group was formed to highlight their plight and its easy solution, the construction of escape ramps.

Examination of two other nearby cattle stops at Purerua confirmed that when shallow, with naturally formed ramps of road metal, no kiwi prisoners had been taken.

Landowners – please check your cattle stops to make sure they only serve the purpose for which they are intended, and alert any neighbours to the simple, no-cost solution to help safeguard our diminishing kiwi populations.

Jacqui Barrington



JOHN DOWDING

in April are not yet available but preliminary surveys of the Mason Bay and Awarua Bay flocks in late February suggested that the baiting has been successful and cat predation reduced. Autumn counts at both sites had declined steadily since 1990 but there has now been a rise in the total population for the first time since the study began. A conservative figure for the 1993 population is currently about 70 birds, up from 62 at the same time last year.

The programme was sponsored by Software Education Associates with additional funds from the DoC/Forest and Bird Threatened Species Trust.

Although the result is very encouraging, there are still problems. There is a serious shortage of male birds in the population – males do most of the nest incubation at night and seem to be more at risk from the nocturnal attentions of feral cats. Two more males were

lost on Table Hill this season, almost certainly because the programme started a month too late. Nests were already present when we arrived in early October and the two males disappeared before bait stations could be installed.

Also because of the acute shortage of males, some female-female pairs are forming and laying clutches of infertile eggs.

On the positive side, our experience this season suggests we can make significant improvements in future baiting strategy. In the wet conditions on Table Hill, most of the cat-baits went mouldy within two months; by modifying the way baits are prepared and by changing them more often we can improve protection of the area with little extra effort.

Timing can also be improved; the loss of two males early this season was a serious set-back, but something we should be able to avoid in

*Feral cats beware: one of 200 bait stations installed around the scrub line on Table Hill. Top: a NZ dotterel chick, only a few days old, hatched this season within the protected area.*

future. If the programme is carried out next season, we must make sure that baits are installed at least a month earlier. This should help significantly, by removing any resident cats well before the birds begin nesting.

Indications from the 1992-93 season are therefore very positive and it is now important to keep up the momentum. The trial programme needs to continue for three to five years for two reasons. First, there will be natural annual fluctuations in dotterel survival and productivity, depending on weather, cat density and so on. We need to know whether the population can be maintained and increased successfully in the longer term, through these fluctuations.

Second, we need to know whether there is significant recruitment in the protected area – will the young birds being produced now return to breed on Table Hill when they are two years old? If not, a few other key breeding sites on the island may need to be protected as well.

Stewart Island's dotterels still have a long way to go, but at least there's some hope. With a technique available which promises help, it is important now to put the whole programme on a more secure footing.

John Dowding