



# the kiwi kiwi recovery discoveries

**The Kiwi Recovery Programme provides both science and know-how which could help save the kiwi from extinction, says HUGH ROBERTSON.**

**K**iwi are in serious trouble. During millions of years of isolation, kiwi evolved a nocturnal flightless lifestyle and characteristics that equipped them well to escape from avian predators. But, like many other native birds, they are unable to cope with the motley collection of predatory mammals brought here by people. Loss of forest habitat, combined with carnage by introduced mammals, has seen kiwi populations collapse from tens of millions a thousand years ago to about 70,000 today.

The Kiwi Recovery Programme was launched eight years ago to try to save our national bird from extinction. The aims were three-fold:

- to find out about the numbers, distribution and genetic variation of kiwi;
- to find out what was threatening kiwi populations;
- and to start to manage the recovery of the most endangered populations of kiwi.

Forest and Bird is an active partner in this programme alongside the Bank of New Zealand which funds much of the research, the Department of Conservation, and the many Kiwis who help with management or who make donations to the programme. The results are considerable progress in understanding the ecology of the various species of kiwi, the threats they face, and the development of heartening management techniques which could arrest the birds' free fall to extinction.

In the early 1990s, we established where kiwi still survive. The news was worse than expected – some important populations had recently collapsed. Pat Miller and Ray Pierce documented the almost complete disappearance of brown kiwi in southern Northland since the 1970s, even though abundant habitat remains. Major declines were also apparent in the Waikato, King Country, Bay of Plenty, East Coast, Ruahine Ranges, West Coast and eastern Fiordland.

Kiwi scientists pooled data from their mainland studies and found that adult mortality averaged seven to eight percent per year, while 'recruitment' (new birds) was only one to two percent each year. The sum of these figures meant that mainland populations were declining at an alarming six percent per year, which equates to a halving in numbers every decade. At this rate of decline, the kiwi population on the mainland would have been close to five million birds when Forest and Bird was established in 1923, but another 75 years hence, there will be a paltry 600 birds left, probably living as widely separated and lonely individuals.

When the programme started, the main threats to kiwi were not well known, apart from the obvious dangers of habitat loss, possum traps and dogs attacks.