

As soon as the project began, it encountered omens. DoC instructed us to survey a known stronghold of weka, yet we found scarcely any birds. The more we and the Department looked for weka, the fewer we found. Weka numbers in the East Coast had crashed. Perhaps the trouble was triggered by starvation in the severe drought of 1982-83, which was followed by the disastrous flooding of Cyclone Bola. From more than 88,000 birds in the early 1980s, East Coast weka numbered fewer than 5000 in 1991. That year, the North Island weka had to be declared a threatened species.

Already our 'fence at the top of the cliff' was becoming an 'ambulance at the bottom'. With the altered status of weka, we could not take birds willy nilly from the wild. Instead we began our breeding programme with young birds caught on the Mansion House lawn on Kawau Island, paired with captive-bred birds from Otorohanga Kiwi House.

In 1991, in response to an article in *Forest & Bird*, 16 stout members offered to join a weka-breeding team. They surveyed weka, helped catch birds, attended meetings, built large, weka-friendly aviaries, and with gusto set out to raise more birds.

Quite quickly we learnt the first fallacy: that weka are easy to breed.

'Just like chooks,' a wildlife expert told us.

From more than 88,000 birds in the early 1980s, East Coast weka numbered less than 5000 in 1991. Now there are less than 700 left on the mainland.

No, they're not, as any weka knows. The breeders tried everything. They furnished their aviaries with logs, ponds, native plants and compost heaps, trying to create Utopia for weka. They provided their birds with special food, supplements, a weka-next-door, and weka calls from tape recorders. Letting the young females 'eye up the talent', scientifically called 'flock mating', produced weka couples who filed for divorce as soon as they got in the breeding aviary. We tried everything to encourage our weka pairs to breed. And although a few did, nesting and rearing their chicks, most didn't. In the end we



GEOFF MOON

simply released weka which failed to breed and replaced them with new pairs of captive-bred young birds until we found partnerships that worked. It was a long, slow grind, but eventually the group bred 52 young birds in a season.

For their release we chose a site in the Karangahake Gorge which cuts through the Kaimai Range between Thames Valley and the Bay of Plenty. After trying to interpret the factors behind the collapse of the Gisborne weka population, we sought criteria for the best place to release our young weka. We looked for a place free from drought, with a mixture of native forest and farmland, wetland and weeds, to provide cover and feed for weka all year around.

The place we chose was on the property of successful weka breeders the late Gary Staples and Elaine Staples, near Kaimai Conservation Park. Here the weka team built a weka 'boarding school' to accommodate captive-bred young birds until they were mature enough to release. The young birds were kept in groups in the aviaries for at least six weeks, and then the door was opened. They didn't go far, held by the familiar site and the calls of those birds still in cages, so we avoided the dispersal and loss that had been the undoing of earlier releases straight into the wild.

For five years weka were released in the

Karangahake Gorge. Some wore radio transmitters to assist monitoring and Gary scrambled through gorse bushes checking on them. Once, a dog took a terrible toll, until we found it a new home.

In the spring of 1995, adults with chicks were seen in the wild. Then disaster struck. In less than a week most of the wild weka disappeared. Some were found as bloody corpses. We used their bodies as bait to trap their predators — two ferrets, one a pregnant female.

The fledgling weka population had been annihilated and so almost, it seemed, were the weka team, who had put such effort and devotion into their birds. Sadly, we had discovered a second fallacy: that weka could withstand predation. No. Weka don't stand a chance against a dog or a ferret. We'd heard stories of weka driving away or even killing stoats, but now we know that it is usually the weka that is killed. Drought and starvation may have precipitated the collapse of the weka population in Gisborne, but it is predators like stoats that are finishing off the remnant groups; just as it is predators that would destroy any such fledgling populations as our weka team could release.

This was a blow to our hopes of re-establishing weka on the mainland. It seemed predator-free islands were the only option left. Yet finding an