

Weka on Islands

Flightless, but good swimmers, weka didn't occur naturally on small islands far from the mainland. When, in earlier days, people put them on offshore islands, the weka ate lizards and killed vulnerable, ground-nesting birds.

DoC has removed weka from some islands where they are deemed to threaten more endangered species: Stewart Island weka were killed or repatriated from Codfish Island, now home of the kakapo. Now the Stewart Island weka is almost extinct on Stewart Island itself and restricted to a number of smaller islands.

The buff weka, once widespread in Canterbury and North Otago, was introduced to the Chatham Island. There are no stoats or ferrets on the Chathams so there the weka thrives, although it is now extinct in the South Island. Its good fortune has not been shared by the taiko (magenta petrel), and other Chatham Island birds, which are preyed on by cats, rats, possums, hedgehogs, pigs, hawks and weka. DoC is fencing the taiko breeding area to exclude cattle, and is trapping introduced mammals and weka.

North Island weka survive on Kawau Island in the Hauraki Gulf, introduced there by an early governor, Sir George Grey. He was an animal fancier, not a conservationist, and introduced many animals from other countries to Kawau Island. His legacy includes four species of Australian wallabies which nibble any hope of regeneration below the few native trees, which are also browsed by possums, living in a forest of kanuka, acmena, pine trees and arum lilies.

The North Island weka he introduced survived for half a century before dying out and being re-introduced by the Wildlife Service in 1976. Today Kawau Island supports more than 70 percent of the North Island weka population. It is a welcome though precarious refuge for weka, and would be much more secure if the wallabies and possums were exterminated, incidentally reversing the botanical degradation of this sad island.



island was easier said than done. Weka are predators themselves, and not always welcome on islands where they would not have been found in the past. Despite the bird's threatened status, no DoC-managed island has been made available for weka and instead we had to rely on the generosity of private island owners.

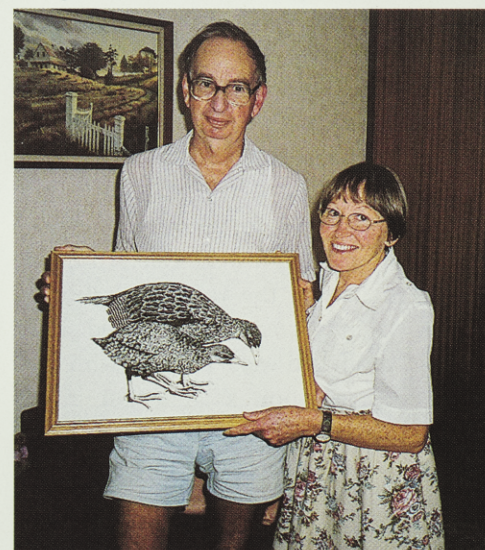
The first island weka home was Pakatoa, owned by the Ramsays, where we released 29 weka in 1996. The chief drawback of Pakatoa is its tiny size; only 24 hectares, and half of it is golf course! Yet the weka thrive. The guests to the island resort find them charming (and many think they are kiwis). After the release, numbers quickly rose to 50 or more birds, and then just as quickly fell in a summer drought. Then, 1999 was a warm, wet year and weka numbers rose again to 80, so in December the weka team caught 10 juvenile weka and transferred them to Whanganui Island, the site of our next release.

Whanganui Island, owned by the Spencer family, lies just offshore from the town of Coromandel. At 283 hectares, it is a big, farmed island, with regenerating native forest and pine plantations. Its major drawback is that a stoat or ferret could swim across from the mainland. The first captive-bred weka were released on the island in 1997, and many probably fell victim to stoats and hawks, attracted to the island by the numerous rabbits. However by 1998 calicivirus had decimated the rabbits so fewer hawks were about and the stoats had been trapped. More weka were released and since early 1999, weka numbers have been increasing.

Rowing weka to release site on Whanganui Island, Coromandel Harbour — farm manager Kim Ward and Lynette Ward.

Upper Coromandel Forest and Bird, and the farm manager Kim Ward, maintain traps and bait stations on the mainland and on the island to try and keep the island stoat-free. Kim's surveys in April this year indicate that there are at least 28 and probably up to 40 adult weka on Whanganui Island, many in pairs and spread all over the island. This is very promising and suggests that, if we can keep the island free of predators, it will become home to a large and important population of the North Island weka.

The late Gary Staples and Elaine Staples received this pen-and-ink drawing of weka to mark their 10 years work for the project. Captive-bred weka were released on their property in Karangahake Gorge, Kaimai Ranges.



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