

'20-Year Vision' to Restore North Island Kokako

A plan to strengthen numbers of the endangered North Island kokako still requires a sponsor to help speed the process. A recovery plan recently released by the Minister of Conservation, Sandra Lee, has a 'vision or goal' of restoring the national population of the bird to around 1000 pairs by the year 2020. The present population is fewer than 400 pairs.

The North Island kokako presently survives in small, isolated populations, where they are sometimes assisted by intensive pest control programmes such as those in 'mainland islands' managed by the Department of Conservation. In places, numbers have fallen to just a handful, often males as the females have been killed on the nest.

The recovery plan suggests that wild populations of the bird should ideally average 50 pairs.

The kokako recovery plan was first published in the 1980s at a time when Crown-owned forests were still being felled in the central North Island. Since then, knowledge of the kokako and its conservation needs has grown 'enormously' according to this new plan. The Department of Conservation has identified the key threats to the bird and developed successful techniques to deal with them.

The prime reasons for the decline in kokako populations are the depredations of tree-climbing ship rats and possums which prey on eggs, chicks, and even adult birds as they nest. To recover kokako populations it is desirable to reduce possums

and ship rats to very low levels at the onset of the kokako-nesting season. This is done by intensively managing blocks of forest, and the recovery plan lists 23 key sites where this must be done during the next 10 years if the planned improvements in population numbers are to be made. More sites, and larger managed areas are 'of course desirable.'

Further research is also envisaged: a major theme of the plan is to develop strategies for managing kokako in larger blocks of more than 10,000 hectares. Also the management of small-medium forest blocks must be made more efficient. It is also planned to restore kokako to some mainland regions from which they disappeared decades ago.

Because kokako management mainly involves intensive pest control, this work should also benefit other species in the forest. Similarly, pest control to

protect other species must also improve the habitat for kokako.

The kokako recovery project depends on managing the environment, and its members envisage working with other groups wherever appropriate, on projects of mutual benefit.

A South Island kokako, with orange wattles instead of blue, has not been seen for quite a few years, and is now probably extinct. Rhys Buckingham, who devoted thousands of hours in search of this bird in the 1980s and 1990s, was reported in the May 1998 *Forest & Bird* as saying 'I just wanted the birds saved from extinction but you can't manage birds that refuse to be found.' Active management, it seems, is also required if the North Island species is to survive. — Gordon Ell

• Find more details in the *North Island kokako recovery plan* (Threatened Species Recovery Plan 30, Department of Conservation).

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The North Island kokako is distinguished by its light-blue wattles, from the South Island subspecies with orange wattles. The Kokako Recovery Plan seeks to boost populations of the North Island kokako from around 400 pairs to more than 1000 in the next 20 years.