

Scientists Confirm Magpies Bad for Native Birds

Controlling magpie numbers may help build up populations of native birds, particularly tui and kereru, according to preliminary results from a major scientific trial.

Landcare Research is co-ordinating a four-year study examining the effects of magpies on other birds in rural areas. The fieldwork is being undertaken by regional councils in five areas: Northland/Auckland; Waikato; Bay of Plenty; Wellington and Southland. Each region has two study blocks covering several hundred hectares: one where magpies are killed, and another where they are not. All types of birds were counted in all blocks in late 1999 before magpie control started, then again in late 2000 after several months of magpie control.

Preliminary analyses of bird counts show that numbers of native pigeon, and three introduced birds (blackbird, skylark and song thrush), increased in nearly all blocks when magpies were killed. Tui, mynahs and spur-wing plovers also increased in most of these blocks, although more data is required to confidently attribute those increases to magpie control.

Landcare Research pest-ecologist John Innes says the results are based on bird counts after just one year of magpie control. Two further annual counts are planned.

'If the increases noted so far are real ecological effects, due to fewer magpies, then even bigger differences between the 'kill' blocks and the 'non-kill' blocks should emerge.

'The interim results should

not yet be taken as a scientific mandate for destroying magpies, but they do suggest that some benefits of magpie control are likely,' John Innes says. 'There is anecdotal evidence from landowners that kereru (New Zealand pigeon) are seen more often after magpie control, and so far the research confirms that.

'Magpies occasionally harass any bird flying or feeding in the open in the magpies' territory. In the cases of tui and kereru at least, this seems to be independent of the diet of the persecuted birds since magpies eat mainly pasture insects, while tui and kereru eat nectar, fruits and foliage.'

Mr Innes says up to 1200

magpies were removed from each of the kill blocks, and the large numbers were a surprise.

'Council workers found up to 20 times more magpies than they thought were present,' he said. — DIANA LEUFKENS



DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION

Black-backed magpies are particularly aggressive in their breeding territories.

Member Wins Loder Cup

A Canterbury ecologist who earlier this year won an 'Old Blue' award from Forest and Bird, has now been awarded the Loder Cup, New Zealand's premier award for botanical conservation.

The award to Dr Colin Meurk recognises his outstanding contribution to the conservation of New Zealand's flora and fauna. Dr Meurk is a scientist at Landcare Research in Lincoln, and is seconded part time to Christchurch City Council as an ecological consultant.

Dr Meurk says his interest in 'ecology and the big holistic things to do with life', started early. He remembers his uncle giving him a book by Peter Scott, the renowned English bird painter, who set up Slimbridge wildfowl refuge and wetland. Slimbridge was in the back of Dr Meurk's mind when he was working to protect Travis Swamp, a wetland on the outskirts of Christchurch. Travis swamp is now regarded as one of the most valuable areas of natural habitat in the

eastern South Island.

As a consultant Dr Meurk had encouraged the city council to plant native vegetation along the edges of waterways within Christchurch. He said council research had shown the majority of people using parks supported the work. Some people felt 'threatened' by native plants and the 'squeaky-wheel principle' resulted in the council compromising.

'There is a vociferous and influential minority who are able to chew the ear of the council and councillors to unravel some of the advances in native plant initiatives in the city,' he says.

Dr Meurk would like to see half the 100 kilometres of waterways in Christchurch planted in natives instead of the present two percent.

The Loder Cup is was first awarded in 1962 by Gerald Loder, later Lord Wakehurst, who developed an extensive collection of New Zealand plants on his estate in Surrey, England. — LYNETTE HARTLEY

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