

fewer than the nine pairs plus young and odd birds found in a study by Alison Ballance for the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research in 1989.

The next summer I took up a visitor from the North Island and we found a family party soon after entering the basin after walking up from Fenella hut. My companion spotted a stoat within metres of the birds, alerting me to the fact that stoats will range up into the mountains almost to 1600 metres altitude in this case, and were likely responsible for any decline.

A small group of local Forest and Birders decided we would try and help the birds. Peter Gaze of the Department of Conservation lent us 14 Fenn traps and boxes and flew them into the basin for us. We made many trips into the basin during the summer of 2000-01, driving past the Cobb reservoir to the end of the road, then

walking a couple of hours up the valley before climbing up steeply through the beech forest and open tops and crossing a small pass into Henderson Basin. Many different people, including children, accompanied us.

We trapped a total of eight stoats, and colour-banded eight wrens to try and follow their progress. Five nests were located, all on bluffs and inaccessible to us, which was interesting as in a study in Fiordland most nests could be reached.

The nest is usually made of tussocks and grasses in a sheltered crevice, enclosed with an entrance tunnel in the side. It is usually lined with feathers; Guthrie-Smith counted nearly 800 in one nest, including those of kiwi and kakapo. (Perhaps a lack of feathers for insulation is another problem nowadays.) Despite trapping some stoats there were fears that predation was

occurring: we saw no juveniles from the first nest we located and the banded male was never resighted. At another nest young were being fed one morning but nothing was seen at the nest that evening and no young were ever seen. So it seems stoats were still taking their toll, with mice another possible predator at nests. (Rats don't seem to venture above the bush-line.)

The days in the mountains that summer were very special, with a sequence of blooming flowers to delight us as we roamed the basin and mountains. Walking up the valley we'd often see kaka and kakariki, robins, tomtits and falcons, whilst pipits sang over our camp-site. I remember lying in the tent one morning watching a pair of young keas play-fighting just outside.

The wrens were often so friendly, popping up right next to one on the rocks, and disappearing just as quickly underneath



*Alpine habitat of the rock wren, Henderson Basin, beyond Lake Cobb in Kahurangi National Park, northwest Nelson. Inset, trapping stoats in alpine zone.*