Newsletter

Issue 102 April 2018

February 2018 will definitely be remembered, when Cyclone Gita left a calling card throughout the District, decisively cutting access to both the Flora and Cobb Valleys, and leaving a trail of destruction in what has been a tranquil corner of the South Island. The Graham Road Flora access is now open following the removal of a significant rock overhang, and thankfully little damage was wrought through to Gridiron, where the carpark has shrunk. However, road access to the Cobb Valley has suffered significant damage - commencing at the lower Takaka Bridge – and will necessitate extensive remedial work.

Lesley Hadley reports on the Alpine Project –

In spite of rather extreme summer weather and road conditions, the weta and gecko Footprint Tracking Tunnel (FTT) monitoring was carried out mid-January to mid-March with cards changed at (almost) fortnightly intervals.

The results have not yet been analysed but a quick scan indicates an approximate 20% *Deinacrida tibiospina* (the NW Nelson giant alpine weta) tracking, a good presence of *Woodworthia* gecko and some skink prints on the higher rodent FTTs (no rodent prints).The results from analysing the prints on the cards will be entered into a database during the winter.

Thanks very much to those FOF volunteers who helped with setting out the lines and the card exchanges. The alpine project will continue and be expanded next summer (Jan 2019). Keep an eye out for FOF invites as this is an exciting opportunity to learn lots about the alpine environment.

Robin and Sandy Toy report –

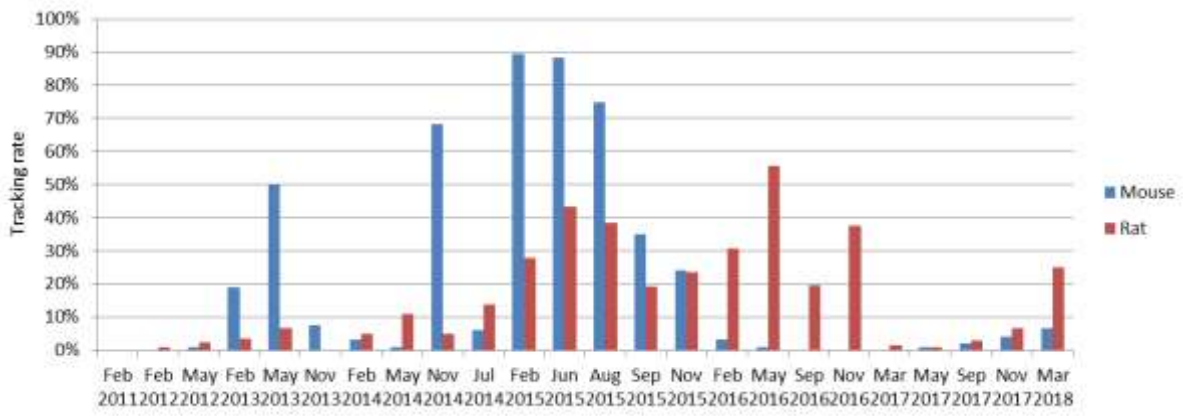
Cyclone Gita – Flora SWAT team activated

Cyclone Gita's havoc on the Flora Road challenged our work on the hill in March. But, a SWAT team managed to do the most urgent tasks. Toby Reid flew Mike, Andy, Paul, Sandy and Robin to various points on the Tablelands and Peel Ridge, dropping overnight bags at Flora Hut and a fadge of overnight kit at Gridiron on the way. Sandra, Lesley and Greg traipsed up the road on foot. Over Days 1 and 2 the aerial team trapped back to Gridiron and the others worked out of Flora Hut. Over three days we checked 850 traps, set and retrieved 110 bush tracking tunnels and 78 alpine tracking tunnels. We serviced cameras on four kiwi nests. Bill Page, Regan and Mauricio also climbed the hill to do their lines before it was closed. A fantastic effort, thanks to all involved. Highlight of the trip was Mike carrying the long strop from Gridiron back to Flora Hut for Toby to retrieve – that's one hell of a carry after doing C-line. Lowlight of the trip was Robin walking for an hour down the track to find a kiwi nest on Tahi's Knoll only to realise he'd left the tracking gear behind and had to go back for it.

Rodent Numbers in the Flora

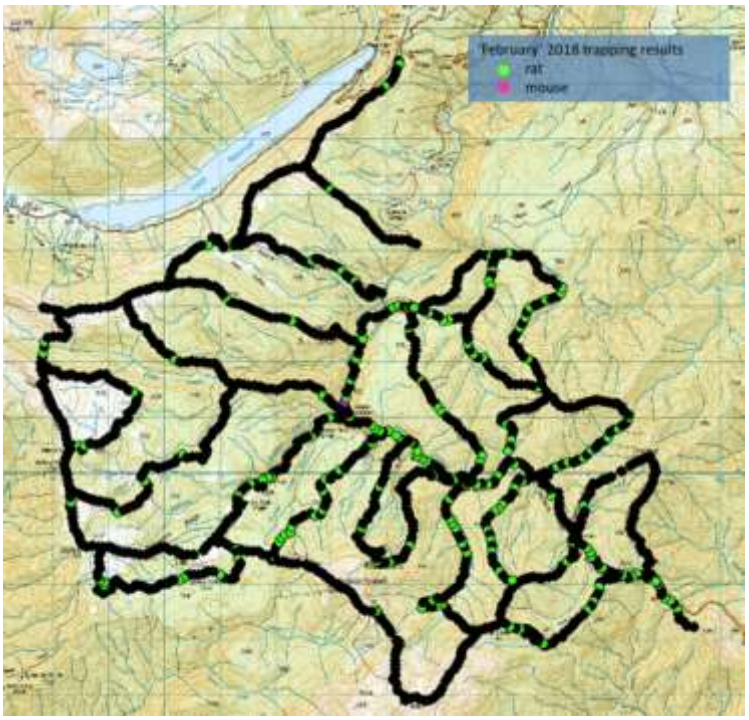
A Flora tracking tunnel campaign was carried out on March 6th. 25% rat and 7% mouse is a lot of rodents! After a year in which rodent numbers have been back to the low levels (<5%) we think of as 'normal' for the Flora, this is a big increase (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Tracking tunnel results for the Flora



High numbers of rats is also reflected in the rodent bycatch in our stoat traps (Figure 2) and we see a lot on the kiwi nest cams as well. We'll have to see how numbers change through the autumn – let's hope they drop.

Figure 2 February 2018 rodent bycatch



Kiwi News

The 'transmitter' phase of the kiwi project is coming an end. This was always intended as a post-translocation monitoring tool – where do the birds go, do they survive, do they pair, do they breed? Each of the four translocations needed two years post-translocation monitoring but that is now nearly complete. So Aorere, Rata, Tai Tapu, Totaranui, Te Rae, Te Hapu, Whakahihi, Anatori, Mangarakau and Toro-ngangara are now 'free-rangers' with only a metal band to identify them if they should be encountered in future. The other kiwi will have their transmitters removed over the coming weeks. From now on we will monitor kiwi numbers by putting out an array of acoustic recorders to record the numbers of calls (Figure 3). This is already underway to provide a baseline while we know roughly how many kiwi are out there.

Figure 3 Acoustic recorder in action

While removing transmitters we were pleased to find that Te Hapu, the sub-adult introduced from South Gouland, was again with Hebe, the Flora bred sub-adult. Hebe's bill has grown a whopping 8 mm in 6 months putting her firmly in the female range. Te Hapu has also grown and is now bigger than some breeding males, though we don't expect Te Hapu and Hebe to breed for a few more years (Figure 4). More surprising, Aorere, who is an old female introduced in 2010 from the Clark River, was found with a sub-adult, probably a male. Aorere has been single for several years, although when she was first introduced she hung out with another sub-adult male, Rakopi. We think she is past breeding age, so this is an interesting cohabitation and we've given her the honorific title 'Auntie' (Figure 5).

Meanwhile monitoring of this season's breeding success continues. We believe six monitored kiwi chicks have been munched this year. Hopefully, the three that remain will get away, but they are still a vulnerable size.

So how successful have the translocations been? Where did the birds go, did they survive, did they pair, did they breed? Who are the ace kiwi catchers? And where is koala creek?

Come to our 2018 AGM, Tuesday 15th May, to hear what we've learned, and how our efforts fit into the overall picture of roroa conservation.

Figure 4 Te Hapu and Hebe

Figure 5 Auntie Aorere with little Toa

Ivan Rogers reports on our whio -

This summer's walk-through surveys showed the *whio* in both the Flora and Grecian Streams continue to be viable breeding populations. The December Flora survey revealed the number of *whio* pairs remaining stable – five pairs – three of which had ducklings at various stages of growth.

A repeat survey in early February showed at least some of the juveniles had fledged, although fewer pairs were seen, quite likely due to flooding earlier in the week sending some of the birds "off the river" for a bit.

The Grecian Stream, surveyed in February was really pumping with no fewer than eight pairs, three with juveniles. Young birds seen on the Graham, Takaka and Motueka Rivers in recent weeks are no doubt dispersing out of the Friends of Flora trapped area. A new community trapping group "Farmers for *Whio*" is now trapping both branches of the Graham River to give *whio* there some protection from stoats.

Thanks to all who volunteered for the surveys – Sian, Thomas, Ruedi, Andy, Michelle, Madeleine, Regan, Peter, Paul, Shaun, Andrea and anyone I may have forgotten. *Photo – Grecian whio, Paul Ewers*

Marian Milne reports on our neighbours - Friends of Cobb - activities -

We have had very low mustelid catches in the Cobb, with rat numbers just beginning to creep up. Rodent monitoring tunnels in the valley are carded with the new electronic timers being trialed…retrieving them is currently the problem!

In Henderson Basin the rock wren have had the best breeding we have seen for the last 6 years. Still in critically low numbers, we located four nests - all of which have successfully fledged.

The juvenile *Deinacrida tibiospina* weta seen last summer on the Peel range were again evident on the nocturnal survey, with 8 or more of the black and golds seen. A Brown ground weta was also seen for the first time since the alpine project began in 2014. DOC believes it is from the *Hemiandrus* genus.

Mice numbers in the alpine regions are creeping up, and rats in the Henderson area are scattered right up to 1450m. Rat control was good in the Cobb after the 2016 1080 operation but an experimental operation in the mid Roaring Lion has likely contributed to the remnant healthy population we are seeing in Henderson Basin. Interestingly the tussock seeding was recorded as zero in both the Grange and Henderson sites this year. Beech seeding is also very very low….this should mean low winter-spring survival for rats and mice.

Our trapping in the Cobb has ground to a halt since the end February road closure. Luckily most traps were serviced just the week before the cyclone, but is disappointing we are unable to have all traps available for the summer wave of stoats, now on the move. We are hopeful that the road will be open in the next few weeks, and we will be up and running again.

Oh, and we must mention the kea nest on the Cobb road that FOC monitored over the spring-summer. Despite every pest known seen on camera, the pair fledged one beautiful young kea…nick named "Catnip". FOC intensively trapped the area around the nest, unsuccessfully targeting the two cats and stoat seen on camera, and we wonder if our regular presence may have contributed to this.
(*A note for readers - The voluntary roster hours put into checking the cat traps and monitoring the nest site by FOC members has been a credit to them and their commitment to conservation. If a $ value was placed on this exercise, this is the most valuable kea in the country – Ed).*

Membership matters -

A significant number of readers would have signed up with the Friends of Flora with an expressed interest in our extensive predator trapping activity. In an effort to follow through on this, your committee has selected LB as a trainee trapping line, providing a basic hands-on grounding in trap management, bait handling, catch identification and route finding, within the typical Flora beech environment. Progression from this could/would be to joining a line team, and, based on merit and/or circumstances, thereafter advancing to Line Leader status. Friends of Flora are conscious of the need to future proof such duties and, as such, new trainee members will be inducted accordingly, and longer serving, interested - though currently non-active - members will be contacted, and given the same opportunity to participate.

Gerald Bruce-Smith
Editor