

No.111

# Newsletter

June 2020

It's great to have the boots back on, and the lifting of the Covid-19 lockdowns!

Mike Malone reports –

All of the trap lines were serviced in late May, so it's not surprising that Robin Toy, below, reports the high catch of mustelids and rats. This continues a trend since the 2019 beech seeding, and the battle to get their numbers back down to prior levels. The June trap checks have started to show a downward trend so hopefully we may expect this to continue with low winter temperatures. One feature of note is the conspicuous number of weasels - possibly resulting from the recent alpine tussock seed mast. The May 2020 Foot Print Tracking Tunnels were postponed to the 13/14th June and, as expected, confirmed the high rodent numbers. There was a great response from volunteers for this work, which was greatly appreciated.

As you will know from the last Newsletter, the double trap replacement has been largely completed, with a big effort from volunteers over the last few years, with individual trap calibration still to be undertaken on most lines to achieve optimum results. This is to reduce the problem of traps being sprung by mice and/or in sympathy from the other's generated shock. New tool kits will be available to assist with this work and appropriate training provided to upskill volunteers where needed.



## Sandy Toy updates us on FOF's Alpine project -

Monitoring projects require a long term commitment to detect trends, but we're starting to see the benefits of the Friends of Flora's alpine monitoring project, already.



Socially-distanced, alpine FOFers enjoying the freedom of the hills during the first weekend in level 2.

We use one set of tunnels for monitoring weta (Deinacrida tibiospina) and another for lizards.

This snaky figure shows the frequency of Mt. Arthur giant wētā footprints in a transect of 50 tracking tunnels along the Wharepapa Mt. Arthur ridge. Each row of spots is an individual tunnel. The leftmost spots are for 2016, those on the right for 2020 (no monitoring in 2017). There appears to be a trend of increasing abundance over time, especially in the lower altitude tunnels.

For the first time this year, we have also recorded mice in these unbaited tunnels. We don't know what effect mice will have on the wētā population, especially the smaller nymphs, next year's monitoring will show.

Rodent footprints were also frequent in the tunnels used for tracking lizards, but the frequency of gecko and skink prints was not significantly lower than last year. Next years results will be particularly interesting.

Thanks to all the FOFers that have helped with this project and braved the winds.





## Roroa monitoring results to be published

Thanks to a special grant from Birdlife International, we have been able to look in detail at eight years of kiwi monitoring data. A paper on roroa post-translocation dispersal and home range formation has been accepted for publication in *Notornis*, the Journal of the Ornithological Society of New Zealand. Here are some key learnings:

 One of the key questions when planning a translocation is how long you need to monitor to determine whether the translocation has been succesful. The Flora kiwi took between 9 and 878 days to settle into a home range, and annual home ranges continued to shift for up to six years.

So, long-term monitoring is needed!

- Many of the kiwi established home ranges over a larger area than was predicted prior to the translocations.
  Consequently, FOF nearly doubled the area we trap.
- Almost everything currently known about home range for any kiwi species is based on daytime roosts.

FOFers spent several nights



tracking the location of kiwi every twenty minutes through the night. This unique information demonstrated that kiwi regularly moved outside the home range estimated from daytime roosts. The picture is from a video of Paul tracking at night, while being 'tracked' by a wily weka (at the top of Paul's thermarest). Well done Paul and all those insomniacal FOF volunteers.

A second paper on the breeding success of the translocated kiwi has also been drafted.

#### Video nasties – unwelcome Flora residents

Shortly before lockdown, we installed a couple of camera traps to see who's visiting the rare Flora limestone wetlands, home of the critically endangered shy foxglove, *Ourisia modesta*, which we introduced in our previous Newsletter. We've just recovered the cameras and the results are shocking:



A giant pig! They 'plough' these vulnerable wetlands and adjoining forest, destroying the plants. They also eat eggs, nestlings and probably our giant *Powelliphanta* snails.

A large feral cat. Feral cats are seriously bad news for our native wildlife – for more information, see a great article by Alan Wilde in the Winter 2020, Forest & Bird magazine. The problem, as our neighbours, Friends of Cobb, found while trying to protect kea nestlings from predation, cats are very wily and super-hard to catch. Our records show we've only ever caught one kitten in a FOF trap (different traps are needed), so we had no strong evidence there were cats roaming the Flora.

This new camera evidence shows otherwise. The blue arrow points to the cat - hard to make out, but there's video on Facebook that shows it is clearly a cat bouncing along -



https://www.facebook.com/friendsofflora/videos/264017791480439. Five hours after this video was taken, a kiwi walked past the camera.



Herds of fallow deer. These precious wetlands are seriously overgrazed, pugged and enriched with dung from the resident deer herd. Lots of video of stags pawing up the ground and thrashing their antlers in the trees.

### Ivan Rogers, Biodiversity Ranger, provides a short history of rodent tracking in the Flora'

Since 2011 the Friends of Flora have done a fantastic job of managing the monitoring of the forest ink-pad rodent tracking tunnels (FTTs) in the Flora. DOC analyses the tracking cards and reports back to FOF on the results. Rodent tracking along with seedfall measuring and - more recently - beech seed snipping from helicopter are two key pieces of information that helps inform DOC of the optimum timing of its aerial 1080 operations. The activity takes up a lot of volunteer hours – no fewer than 17 FOFers were deployed on the recent FTT checks over the weekend of 13/14 June. Initially FOF 'inherited' the 10 lines installed by DOC, and then added lines in Balloon Creek, Deep Creek, and last year, a bush-edge line, BL. Placing tracking cards to measure stoat activity was done for a time but not pursued in recent years due to the relatively complex technique leading to errors, the high person/hours required and dubious accuracy of results. Since Nov 2017 tracking by small and large weta species is being recorded and is now showing interesting trends – summer peaks but a declining trend line.



The chart above shows rodents responding as they should after the Dec 2016 aerial 1080 operations. Rat tracking plummets from 37% to 1.6% and mice remain at zero tracking.

Not so after last winter's operation – rat numbers have remained stubbornly high and mouse numbers have soared. The small and large weta tracking will have to be watched to see if they rebound from recent very low tracking.



National Volunteer Week runs 21<sup>st</sup> through to 27<sup>th</sup> June 2020, and the Motueka Department of Conservation Management and Staff wish to thank the Friends of Flora and all their volunteers for their contribution to biodiversity enhancement in Kahurangi National Park.

## Safety in the Hills -

The recently concluded search in Kahurangi National Park serves to underline the importance of preparation for and adherence to the proven practices that lead to safe, enjoyable and productive experiences in the hills. With this in mind the Editor has been working on a Field Guide for the Friends of Flora, which complements our annual FOF Safety Management Plan. This booklet has a primary focus on the protocols for FOF work days – both for groups and individuals – with added detail on overdue person and search triggers. Motueka LandSAR support the contents and have offered to undertake field exercise work with us, to strengthen our knowledge of the outdoor safety code, which is great.

Active volunteers will receive a copy of this booklet and DOC's 'Practical Guide to Trapping', as part of FOF's duty of care to those who undertake field work within their activity scope.



# From the Chair -

Please make a note - Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> July for the Friends of Flora 2020 Annual General Meeting - 7pm at the Cricket Pavilion Pah St, Motueka. Supper will be provided.

We are particularly pleased to have David Melville as our Guest Speaker, addressing us with 'A Godwit Update', which includes his Flyway research and North Korea visit experiences.

I'm pleased to welcome these new FOF volunteers - John M, Manu D, Graham B, Erwin O, Barry B and David C. The lockdowns have somewhat disrupted introductions to our field activities, however this is progressively being attended to and we welcome their interest and cmmitment.

I recently visited Zealandia in Wellington, and took their two hour guided tour around the sanctuary. The Covid-19 lockdown has severely affected their visitor numbers, which I'm sure has similarly impacted on The Brook Waimarama Sanctuary – <u>www.brooksanctuary.org.nz</u> – closer to home in Nelson. This commenced work in 2004 as a community collaborative project to recreate an historic piece of New Zealand where our native birds, reptiles and invertebrates can flourish in this local green haven, protected by an extensive 14.4km of perimeter fencing. Self-guided walks of varied challenge, and guided tours are available, their Visitor Centre having informative displays outlining the Sanctuary's crucial achievements and goals.

If you haven't visited The Brook, then now is a good time to view and support their conservation efforts - and this valuable community asset.

Keep warm and safe

Cheers Gerald