# Newsletter

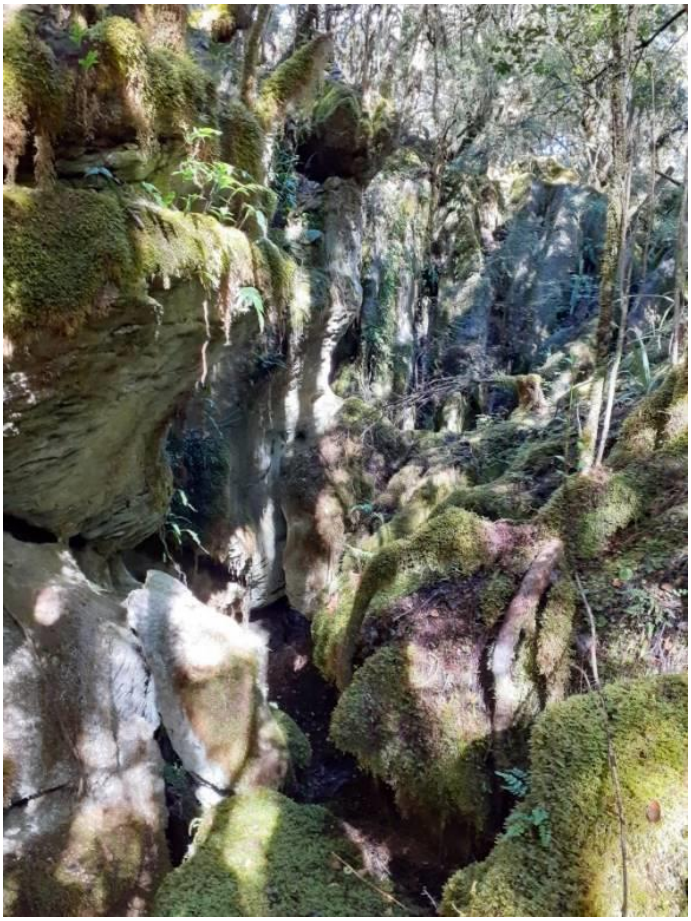
No. 115 June 2021

20 years now, and still going strong……welcome to this midyear update of the Friends of Flora's activities, with new goals for consideration.

## Kiwi survey Barron Flat – Robin and Sandy Toy

North of the Grecian River an unnamed ridge rises to 400 m; to its west a plateau slopes down from southeast to northwest. This plateau is wild country, carved by water, with dramatic limestone spikes and tomos – as the photo shows. In places you can stand on dry ground and hear water echoing in underground caverns beneath you. Elsewhere, you can straddle a gap between rocks less than a metre wide and peer straight down for 4 metres. There is moss-draped bush with immense red and silver beech and a lot of dry, scratchy regrowth on impoverished soils on the northern boundary of the National Park.

As the kiwi dispersed after translocation, several gravitated towards this plateau. The area is used by hunters with dogs, so these kiwi were vulnerable; we tried to retrieve any kiwi if they seemed to be setting up home ranges in this area. Totaranui, Rua and Korowhiti (all females) were brought back to the Flora valley and remained within the trapped area, but Ono (male) dropped his transmitter before we could get to him and Pohara (male) disappeared here (hopefully his transmitter failed).



In April, three years after removing all kiwi transmitters, we carried out an acoustic survey to see if kiwi were on this plateau north of the Grecian. We placed five recorders approximately 1 km apart and analysed all the calls detected over five nights. We synchronized the clocks on the recorders so we could tell if more than one recorder was picking up the same call. By working through which recorders picked up calls and which did not, we estimated the location of calling kiwi. Looking at estimated locations and timing of calls, we estimated how many kiwi were present.

Excitingly, we detected both male and female calls. There is at least one pair and a single male, but there could be two pairs and two single males. The Grecian forms the northern boundary of FOF's trapping area. Without trapping, any kiwi chicks hatched on Barron Flat are vulnerable to predation. So….you've guessed it… we're exploring options for extending our trapping network over this area.


Photo: Ruedi Mosimann

## Fight for the Wild -

is a valuable and timely documentary film and podcast series exploring the notion of a Predator Free 2050 in Aotearoa New Zealand.


The series contain some gut-wrenching viewing of mustelid predator activity, reinforcing both the priority of, and need for, the work that DOC, FOF and other such focused groups are undertaking to protect our precious and unique wildlife – including the *roroa* great spotted kiwi, above.

Produced by Fisheye Films - filmed and directed by Peter Young, and written and presented by Dave Hansford – both the Friends of Flora, and Friends of Cobb, were eager participants to support and tell that story.

The series comprises 4 x 45 minute videos and 4 x 25 minute podcasts, and can be accessed at www.rnz.co.nz/programmes or at www.predatorfreenz.org.nz .

The series emphasise the current tipping point of our wildlife in their natural habitat, the challenges needing to be addressed, and visits those communities rallying to avoid further

wildlife decimation. Episode 2 in particular takes a look at the suite of smart and autonomous eradication tools being trialled, which may well provide the option of landscape-scale benefits beyond the current boots on the ground model.

Readers having viewed the series will easily recall the somewhat novel measures needed to be taken by the Friends of Cobb to protect a monitored kea nesting site against visiting weka, feral cats and possum - all of which have the ability to disrupt nesting and further use of this site – through the erection of this 'predator fence'. *Photo – Peter Young*


Nina and Richard, pictured above, and displaying the dogged commitment of all the FOC trappers, have generously provided an update on activity at this site, and a webcam pic of the kea couple.

'Since the filming of *Fight for the Wild* our Kea pair have still been frequenting the nest regularly. Game cameras have captured them displaying courtship behaviour - including mutual feeding and preening, exchanging nesting material and mating even - but no egg laying was evident. The amount of time they spent at the nest last breeding season would cancel out the likelihood that they had a nest elsewhere. The predator fence we built still holds strong, and no predators have got inside it. Still catching the occasional rat in nearby traps and a weasel two months ago 150m from the nest site. We're looking forward to observing them in spring in the hope that this is the year they produce eggs and fledge chicks.'

## The Ferret threat to the Flora – Ivan Rogers – Sandy and Robin Toy 

Ferrets have only occasionally been caught in the Flora over the years, but a recent spike in ferret catches in the Flora, Graham, Pearse and Wangapeka catchments is a cause for concern. Originally imported to combat rabbit plagues, New Zealand ferrets are from domesticated stock bred as 'working' animals or for rat control on ships - or even rat baiting as sport. As a result of their domestic origins they are far less aggressive towards humans than the much smaller stoats and weasels – to the point of being able to be handled safely non-euthanized. That being said, they are voracious predators, probably responsible for the demise of weka, are disastrous for penguin colonies and braided river ground-nesting birds, and certainly a grave threat to kiwi.

Ferrets generally favour open farmland where they prey mostly on rodents and lagamorphs (rabbits and hares), and those ferrets entering beech forest are often dispersing juveniles - and are able at that stage of growth to being caught in DOC 150 and 200 series traps. Adult ferrets are primarily targeted with the considerably larger DOC 250 traps and the newly developed Poditraps. FOF have access to Poditraps through the DOC Motueka Office, and the Motueka Menshed team is making a handful of 250 traps for deployment by FOF should further ferret presence be apparent.

A ferret recently caught in a Wangapeka double trap by these Tapawera Area School teachers >

While we suspected that the recent ferret catch on FOF's A line was a one-off wandering ferret, we wanted to be more certain and set out to investigate further. Following discussion with DOC's Craig Gillies, we adapted the prototype camera trap monitoring protocol and set ten trail cams in the area trained on hunks of fresh rabbit meat. Of course, a hunk of meat at ground level will last about 2 minutes in the bush with weka around, so we had to design a lure station to keep the weka out - a chicken wire cage within a bigger chicken wire cage.

What did we find? Answer: hundreds of weka selfies but thankfully no ferrets, cats, stoats or other predators. The camera traps and lure cages worked well and appear to be a practical tool for monitoring the presence of larger predators in localised areas.

*Further reading-*
*"The Handbook of New Zealand Mammals" Carolyn M King and David M Forsyth.*
*"Invasive Predators in New Zealand" Carolyn M King.*

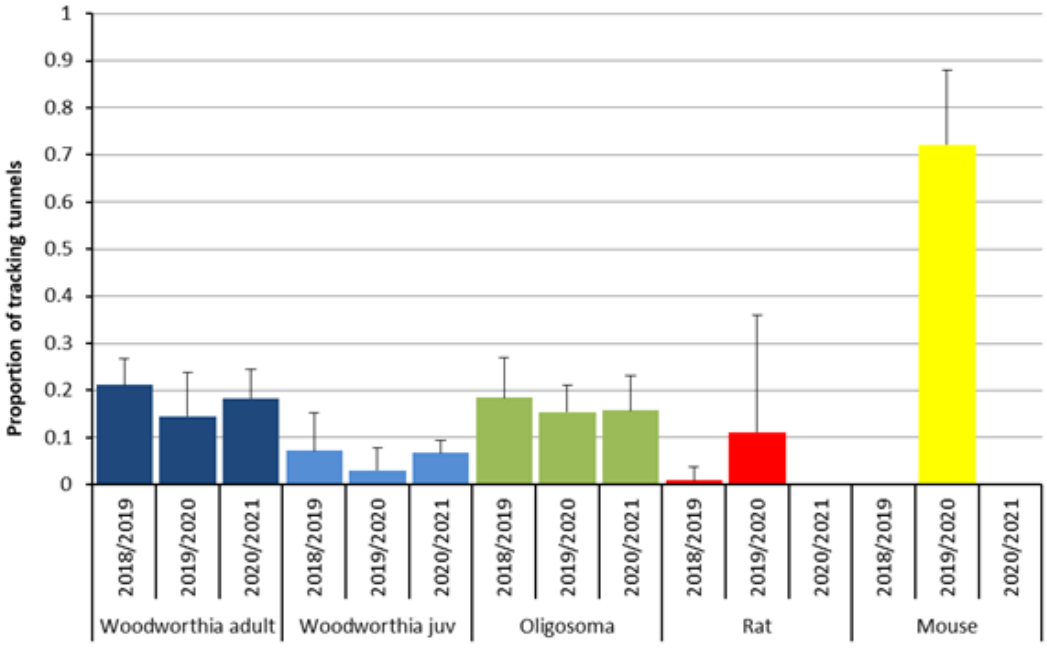
## The Flora's missing lizards – Ivan Rogers – Sandy and Robin Toy



FOF are doing tremendous work on gathering population data on the alpine lizards *Oligosoma infrapunctatum* (speckled skink) and *Woodworthia* "Mt Arthur" (Kahurangi gecko) through their Alpine Project. And the presence of Black eyed geckos is confirmed through the occasional footprint - and finding a single specimen to be photographed by Dylan van Winkel for the "Reptiles and Amphibians of New Zealand – A Field Guide". There are, however, a few tantalising historical records that point to there being possibly a few further species potentially within the site. For instance there is a single record of the Nelson green gecko (*Naultinus stellatus*) from Mt Arthur in 1965. The perimeter of the Flora, both in Kahurangi National Park and scrubland on private property, is also lightly sprinkled with records of Nelson green geckos. A single record too for the Forest gecko (*Mokopirirakau granulatus*) exists from Cundy Creek in the west of the Flora site from 1997. Sightings of unidentified skinks from Lodestone and the Flora Road are also worth further investigation. Maybe with a bit of scratching around there's more to be found.....watch this space.

*Nelson green gecko (left) and a Forest gecko (right) both from Kahurangi National Park.*

In March we reported on the results of the summer's alpine giant wētā monitoring programme. Results are now in for the parallel alpine lizard monitoring programme. It was pleasing to see that tracking rates appear to have bounced back after last year's mammoth mouse spike, with plenty of juvenile prints also detected. The figure below shows the proportion of lizard tracking tunnels with lizard or rodent prints over three monitoring seasons. Error bars are 95% confidence limits.



## Operations update – Mike Malone



Trap check frequencies are being well maintained in the cooler times and it is encouraging to see the continuing decline in mustelids, though the rat catches appear to have settled out. Thankfully there has been no more evidence of ferret or cat presence.

Last month's forest FTTs (Footprint Tracking Tunnels) were undertaken on schedule, confirming those low rodent numbers – rat prints down about half since February's tracking, and nil mice showing up. Almost all of that rat tracking was on the lower W and Z lines with very little appearing on the others, and it was great to see a few new volunteers getting involved with this work. There are thirteen forest FTT lines, each having ten tracking sites placed out between 700m and 1300m, providing comprehensive footprint indications.

Some further trap calibration and adjustment has been completed on Z line so just a couple of lines remain to complete this key work – and hopefully another one or two working bees will finish these off.

We are now encouraging our teams to bag up and retrieve any spent erayze bait for disposal rather than simply throwing to waste near the traps. We figure the old bait may present to mustelids as mouldy and unpalatable – whilst still retaining some odour - and could well discourage them from entering traps with fresh erayze baits.

There have been a few volunteer changes on some of the lines and new Line Leaders brought in, as required. The recent 'Fight for the Wild' exposure has triggered a number of new volunteers for our varied work, so our boot power base is looking pretty healthy. Finally, now that winter is upon us all, be more careful given the shorter daylight hours and wetter ground conditions.

Figure 2. Weasel and stoat catches per trap

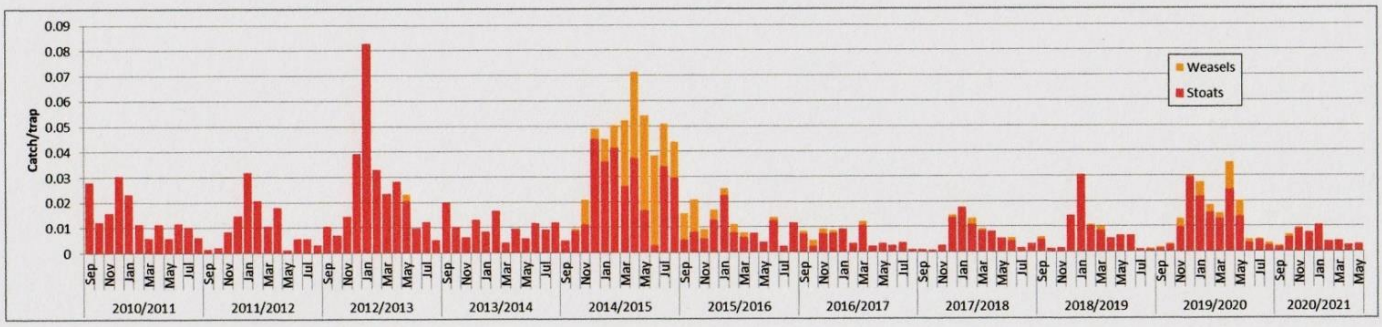
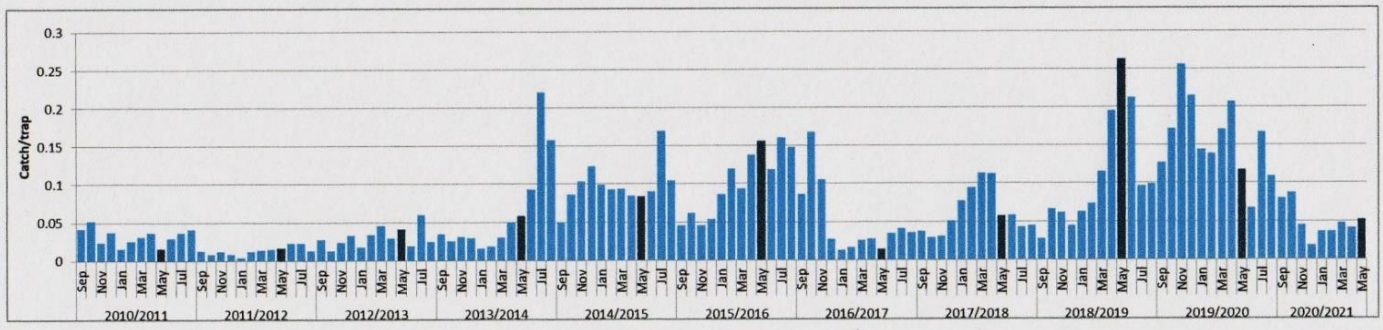



Figure 3. Rat catches per trap (May catches shown darker blue)



## From the Chair -



Last month's 2021 AGM drew a pleasing record attendance, with all standing committee members being re-elected. The importance of the contribution/s by our many volunteers to FOF's varied achievements was again acknowledged, together with the generous financial assistance received from those crucial donors supportive of our biodiversity enhancement work, and goals. A big thank you to all.

Having two decades behind us - and starting the next - the challenges never seem less, the expansion of our operations in the Grecian and northwards towards Barron Flat being very much a natural progression in line with those same goals discussed around the camp in 2001. There's some challenging territory out there calling for a renewed commitment to our own 'fight for the wild'.

All the best,

Gerald and Sandy

*Some colour treats enjoyed alongside the Flora track between Ghost Creek and Upper Junction in April –*