



Newsletter

No. 116

Sept/Oct 2021

Time for an update on the Friends of Flora's activities.....

Flora Kea update - Chrissy Kaneen

The installation of game cameras at our known kea nest in early July was met with great anticipation, with a male kea coming in to check us out and to make sure we were setting the cameras up to get his best side. This kea, banded in November 2019, moved in on the 1st of September closely followed by a female later that day. Their time has been spent displaying the usual courtship procedures of preening, feeding and getting the nest all nice and cosy. One video captured the male taking some more bedding into the nest as the



snow was falling outside. No footage of mating has been captured at the time of this writing and, as both kea flew in while we were maintaining the cameras on the 15th September, we are pretty sure no eggs have been laid. Unfortunately the cameras had now also picked up some very unwanted visitors – goats, and definitely more alarmingly, a rather healthy looking black cat. The cat was spotted on two occasions before the kea moved in, and has the potential to easily take the female whilst she is on the nest. We also have newer footage of a stoat entering the nest and emerging from another exit site, though shortly after the male kea flew in and chased after the stoat. Fortunately both kea were seen together later in the day and their routine didn't look too disrupted.

Viewing the footage of the kea nest has been a rollercoaster ride so far, but what it has done is bring a new awareness of how vulnerable our native taonga/treasures are - also evidenced in the recent 'Fight for the Wild' podcast series. You can read and hear how such cat and stoat incursions are a real threat, but only when you are watching 'your' daily footage, and see these pests on screen right in front of you, does it all become very real - very quickly - and clearly the kea nest will now, regrettably, be on their radar.

Fingers crossed, we'll have some more good news in the next Newsletter!

New volunteer induction – Gerald Bruce-Smith

The Friends of Flora maintain a training line to provide a practical introduction to their trapping and footprint tracking work within the Flora, the territory and route chosen having varied terrain of a semi alpine and forest ridge nature, and necessitating some route finding skill and confidence in the outdoors. This also softens the impersonal nature of a website sign up, and provides an early contact for a progressive introduction to the crucial footprint tracking tunnel field work, undertaken quarterly, and the opportunity thereafter to work with a number of our longer serving volunteers in more challenging terrain and varied duties. Interested volunteers do need to be aware that trap monitoring and management is long haul work, with patience required, early starts, a good level of fitness and the ability to work in varied outdoor situations and conditions. The conservation estate traversed is itself a visual treat, providing rewarding flora and fauna views and sightings, to balance with these varied inputs.

FOF future directions – Sandy Toy

FOF has achieved incredible biodiversity gains over the last twenty years, but we're a long way from achieving our aims of restoring the biodiversity values of the Flora (summarised in the 2016 review *Biodiversity treasures of the Flora*). At our 20th birthday celebrations, DOC principal scientist, Graeme Elliot gave us a nudge and suggested new directions we might like to explore. The FOF committee is considering the way forward for FOF, but we are keen to hear everyone's ideas. After 20 years, it is timely to take stock and consider how we want FOF to evolve over the next twenty years.

Biodiversity treasures of the Flora

A stocktake of the ecological values of the Salisbury Ecological Management Unit and the threats they face



Photo: Ruaidi Moiraman

A report for Friends of Flora and the Department of Conservation, August 2016

Sandy Toy

The search for the forest ringlet – Sandy Toy

Meanwhile, there are heaps of exciting biodiversity monitoring projects we could take forward but we need people to step up to lead them. One of these is a search for the gorgeous forest ringlet butterfly. In 1889, G.V. Hudson, read a paper to the Wellington Philosophical Society about a week he spent searching for

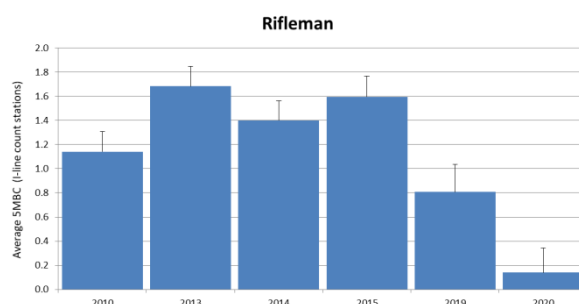


entomological treasures of the (Flora) Table-land. He stated '*Here on favourable days in January and February may be seen the rare and beautiful Dodonidia helmsii flying quietly about in and out of the sunshine, and settling on the branches just out of reach*'. Even then, it seems the forest ringlet was not common. We know the species is in decline elsewhere but we do not know if it is still wafting around in the Flora. The adults aren't on the wing for long and, even then, are often high in the canopy, so could it be being overlooked? Perhaps wasp predation of the caterpillars pushed it to local extinction, but if they haven't, a wasp control trial would be very interesting. Last year we trialled searching the host plants to find the caterpillars (see photo), but, they're elusive, most commonly recognised by the pattern of damage on the leaves. It's a needle in a haystack search, but although we didn't find any caterpillars, we did find some leaf damage that looked promising. We'll try again this year.

As I write this it is sheeting it down outside, but spring is upon us and, undeterred by the rain, a song thrush is perched in a bare tree proclaiming his patch, his dominance. On 20th September, I heard my first shining cuckoo, back from wintering in the Solomon Islands and the Bismarck Archipelago, to parasitize the nests of grey warbler once more. In the Flora it's a lot colder than at home, but the birds are beginning to 'bloom' too; tomtits are giving their 'Come-on, come-on, come-on' call, and the grey warblers that fall silent over winter are warbling busily. Long-tailed cuckoo have been seen and heard. Next month we'll start the 5-



minute bird counts (5MBC) that we use to monitor how well the commoner birds are faring. We do 120 of these counts along the Flora track each year. They're a pretty crude tool, but that means if it looks like something is going on, it almost certainly is. For the last couple of years, we have seen a decline in rifleman numbers. Last year it



was so marked, we did some extra counts at higher altitudes. There we found more riflemen. Is this a response to the rat plague that followed the 2019 beech mast? If so, then the riflemen should have a reprieve this year as rat numbers appear to have reduced to historically low levels. Hopefully, rifleman numbers will respond and by next year we'll be back up to pre-mast numbers.

Photo: Ruedi Mosimann

Operations – Mike Malone

As our most recent Volunteer update noted, having double traps in situ has once again lessened any detrimental impacts from the recent Covid lockdown, though same did necessitate a rescheduling of the August forest Footprint Tunnel tracking work to September – which encouragingly indicated a rodent tracking reduction to 2.3pct. The Alpine FTT lines were similarly attended to, as reported by Lesley Hadley.

The November forest FTTs will proceed, and we look forward, as always, to interest from our newer volunteers, given that this is a great opportunity to contribute, keep the fitness up, and explore our line network in the company of longer serving bods.

The now overdue annual Line Leaders workshop will await Level 1, which hopefully won't be too far off.

Celebrations to acknowledge the Friends of Flora's 20th Anniversary were held Saturday 24th July, at the Moutere Hills Community Centre, attended by a large number of FOF volunteers and guests, with addresses by Maryann Ewers, Sandy Toy and Graeme Elliot covering the group's founding days, goals and notable achievements - through to the significant challenges facing us today.

Mingling, whilst enjoying the tasty finger food and local wines, was the order of the evening, with five year stations set up by Chrissy and Warren to capture the 'when you joined FOF' groups for reminiscing and photographs. Robin once again tested memories with a quiz, and Ruedi captured the event on camera.

Many thanks to the organisers – Sandy, Sandra, Peter and Clare, Chrissy and Lesley – and to those who so generously donated funding and their time, towards this most enjoyable celebratory evening reunion.

A selection of photographs of the evening, including the time displays, are freely viewable via our website toolbar at www.fof.org.nz



Photo: Ruedi Mosimann

Paul Bond entertained the FOF volunteers and their guests with his jovial '*Flora song*'.

Alpine Project Update – Lesley Hadley

The plan was to leave footprint tracking cards in 25 tunnels over the 2021 winter to be changed monthly. The objective was to observe when the weta and lizards 'dig in' for the winter and when they reappear in the springtime. The best laid plans of mice and men . . . were thwarted not only by winter rain and snow but also lockdown. However, new cards were placed in the tunnels on 14th Sept, so we hope to witness them when/as they become active.

Last year's monitoring tracked both adult and juvenile weta (*Deinacrida tibiospina*) which was pleasing to see after the rodent outbreak of 2019/2020. There was no significant change detected in the proportion of lizard tunnels with reptile prints despite that high rodent tracking. *Oligosoma* (skink) are not as widespread as *Woodworthia* (geckos). This could reflect the micro-habitat differences as we placed the tunnels in habitat suitable for geckos.

Meantime a team of experts reviewing the conservation status of all known (135) New Zealand reptile taxa has changed the identity and name of our Mt Arthur skink and the threat status of our gecko - The name *Oligosama newmani* or Newman's speckled skink has been proposed (previously *O. infrapunctatum*). The skink is quite widespread, found on Stephens Island, down the West Coast to about Hokitika, around St Arnaud and in other parts of Nelson Lakes National Park, and in quite a lot of places in Kahurangi, including Wharepapa. Although 'our' Wharepapa *O. Newmani* is quite distinctive in colour, it is genetically the same as other high-altitude populations in Nelson Lakes and Kahurangi NP, so is not a distinct species.

Thankfully the gecko we monitor, *Woodworthia*, doesn't appear to have changed taxonomically, but its threat status has moved from 'Naturally Uncommon' to 'At Risk - Declining'. There are heaps of status qualifiers attached to this assessment: climate impact; conservation research needed; data poor recognition; data poor trend; range restricted and sparse. FOF's monitoring will hopefully be helping address some of these data gaps.

Overall the review of trends for lizards is scary: *"In this assessment, populations of c. 70% of taxa (89 of 125) are expected to decrease over their next three generations compared with 46% (49 of 106) in the assessment of Hitchmough et al. (2016)..."*



Martin and Ruedi, clearly enjoying their recent alpine FTT card work.....and with that backdrop, why not?

Friends of Cobb – Kea update

Our subscribers – and viewers of the recent 'Fight for the Wild' podcasts - will recall the measures the Friends of Cobb team had introduced earlier this year to protect their kea nest site from the plethora of visiting predators - a tall wire mesh fence being the most conspicuous aid.

They have been successful in their mission, advising just yesterday that two chicks are now domiciled within the site, being cared for by their parents, which is truly welcome news.

Well done to the FOC team for this outcome, and the considerable work and measures undertaken to achieve such success!



David (Titch) Klement – Bill Rooke, Maryann Ewers and Ivan Rogers

It is with great sadness that we report the death of an original FoFer. David (aka Titch) Klement passed away at Woodlands Rest Home during lockdown on September 4th after suffering from a series of ailments over recent years. Titch was one of the group which instigated the formation of Friends of Flora and was an active volunteer for fifteen years until ill health intervened - this photo being taken during the 2001 trap layouts, at Horseshoe Creek.

He will be remembered by many as the gear shed man. Our shed was situated for many years on Titch's property at Lower Moutere where he kept everything neat, tidy and labelled. He was a regular on A and I lines, and with that cheeky grin of his always took time out to explain FoF's work to enquiring members of the public. When lockdown is over, Titch's sister and other family members will be journeying down from Auckland and his ashes are to be scattered in the place he loved the most - the Flora Valley. Rest in peace Titchy and we're sure that all your FoF friends would echo the following sentiments -

"Thanks for the memories and for your efforts to save the birds of the Flora, Titch. You are a FOF legend".



From the Chair –

All active volunteers will have received an email from ourselves last week requesting a sign off of the Annual FOF 2021 Annual Health & Safety Plan. Prior to undertaking any field work in the Flora, volunteers must confirm they have read and understood this Safety Management Plan, and also have a responsibility to raise any health and safety concerns/issues with FOF and/or DOC, and speak up if they believe any scheduled activity is unsafe.

Thankfully things appear to have settled down following the recent Delta lockdown, and we appreciate the effort made to catch up on trap line checks and tracking tunnel work.

We wish to again thank our generous donors, whose contributions enable Friends of Flora to continue its valuable biodiversity enhancement work - and broaden our directions – within this special ecological sector of Kahurangi National Park.

Cheers

Gerald and Sandy