

Newsletter

No.117

December 2021

Welcome to this informative round up of the Friends of Flora's activities over recent months.

Thoughts from the Chair – Sandy Toy

It all began with the whio. Twenty years ago Maryann Ewers and Bill Rooke noticed that the whio in the Flora had slowly disappeared and there was just one lonely male left. They decided to do something about it and together with a group of family friends formed the community group Friends of Flora. So having celebrated 20 years of incredible achievements in July this year, it felt appropriate to round off the year and the two decades of hard mahi, with the bi-annual walk-through survey of whio in the Flora stream. Ten rather sleepy volunteers gathered at Pokororo at 7:00 on 23 December - a few



relative newbies; several old timers; and our leader, Ivan Rogers, who was one of our earliest members, long-term Committee member, previous newsletter editor, and our point of contact with the Department, and local whio champion (whew – thanks Ivan!).

We split into pairs each with a stretch of river to walk down. We had a heck of a lot of rain last week, but thankfully the water level had dropped and we could wade down the river with eyes peeled for grey lumps on the river bank, loafing on a rock or cruising down the river. Or, to make things easier, a flash of ivory bill



or the indignant 'whio' call of the male or guttural growling of the female. The team mapped 4 pairs and a singleton – typical for this 5km stretch of river. It was a stunning day and great to know that, at least for now, this taonga is swimming safe in the Flora and colonising all the surrounding creeks and rivers.

After twenty years the whio re-establishment is one of FOF/ DOC's greatest success stories in the Flora, and is testament to the commitment and dedication of the FOF volunteers, not only in doing the essential stoat control, but also in monitoring the outcomes over the long term, so that management can be adjusted if necessary. This commitment is reflected throughout the stories in this newsletter and for me, sums up the spirit of FOF.

So as we enter our third decade, thank you to all our volunteers over the years. Thanks to our partners, especially in DOC. Thanks to all our supporters, and funders, without you we couldn't keep this special corner of Kahurangi National Park a real biodiversity hotspot. And thanks to Wayne Elia for this special logo which adorned many a Christmas newsletter.

Bird monitoring – Sandy and Robin Toy

5-minute bird counts have been made along the Flora track, from Flora Hut to Horseshoe Creek since 2005. We've just completed the 2021 counts, all 387 of them. The number of counts is more than three times that made in previous years, because last year we noticed a big decline in the numbers of rifleman in the counts, but *ad hoc* observations suggested this decline was not occurring at higher altitudes. So, this year we conducted counts in four altitudinal bands from 700 to 1300 m. We're still crunching the numbers, but three things stand out:

• Rifleman are scarce in the Flora valley and are absent in the lowest altitude band, but regularly detected at above about 1000 m. Rifleman are particularly vulnerable to rat predation being hole-

nesters. Being relatively weak fliers, it may take some time for them to spread back into lower altitudes now that the rat numbers, having been high for several years, seem to have crashed.

- Robin and tomtit numbers have shown no consistent trend over the years, so we were a bit surprised to find that in the lowest altitude counts robin were much more commonly detected and tomtit much less commonly so than at other altitudes. Not sure what is going on there, but competition between the species has been reported elsewhere, with robin coming off better.
- As expected, brown creeper were detected much more commonly at higher altitudes. Brown creeper are endemic and hugely valuable in their own right, but with mohua now extirpated from the top-of-the-south, brown creeper are now the only local host of long-tailed cuckoo (LTC). As LTC



are classified 'Threatened - Nationally Vulnerable' (see elsewhere in this newsletter), keeping them in the Flora requires the continued success of brown creeper.

Threat status of birds in the Flora – Sandy and Robin Toy

DOC have just released their 5 yearly re-assessment of the threat status of NZ birds. https://www.doc.govt.nz/globalassets/documents/science-and-technical/nztcs36entire.pdf .

The assessment covers 491 species. Of these, the status of 25 is assessed to have improved the status of 22 is assessed as having got worse. For resident species, there are 11 classifications ranging from 'Extinct' through four 'Threatened' categories ('Nationally Critical', 'Endangered', 'Vulnerable', 'Increasing'), then four 'At Risk' categories ('Declining', 'Recovering', 'Relict', 'Naturally Uncommon') to 'Not threatened'.

There are six bird species in the Flora that are 'Threatened' at a national level. All occur at low densities and are dependent on ongoing predator control over very large areas, so FOF's efforts over 10,000 ha are useful, but limited. The good news is that all six seem to be doing well in the Flora:

- Our monitoring of **roroa** (great spotted kiwi 'Threatened, Nationally vulnerable') breeding indicated chicks are getting away and kiwi are being detected outside the core trapping area;
- Whio ('Threatened, Nationally vulnerable') are a 'star' of the Flora, with massive growth of the local population since FOF started trapping, and with birds now spreading out into surrounding areas;
- Three chicks fledged from the one **kea** ('Threatened Nationally endangered ') nest we monitor with cameras in 2019, and we've seen a single chick this year, kea regularly entertain us when up the hill;

- Anecdotal observations suggest kaka ('Threatened Nationally vulnerable ') are being heard more and more frequently and seen in larger numbers;
- **NZ Falcon** ('Threatened Nationally increasing ') are known to be breeding at several sites.
- Information on **long-tailed cuckoo** ('Threatened Nationally vulnerable ') is harder to gather, because they are rarely seen and are more vocal at night. But, the acoustic recorders we put out in January each year, detect a lot of long-tailed cuckoo calls compared to other areas of Kahurangi.

Four species in the next tier of risk, 'At Risk', are found in the Flora and their fortunes in our patch are more mixed:

- Yellow-crowned kākāriki (YCK, 'At Risk Declining') is the only species found in the Flora, whose national status has got worse since the last threat status assessment, made in 2016. A decline is also apparent in the Flora YCK were regularly heard up until 2018, but now appear much more scarce. This local change may reflect the masting of the beech forest, for successful breeding of YCP is dependent on beech mast, but we also know that hole-nesters like YCP are very vulnerable to rat predation, and rats have, until recently, been abundant by historical standards.
- **Fernbird** ('At risk declining ') has a very localised distribution within FOF's area of activity and appear to be hanging on where the habitat is good
- **SI robin** ('At risk declining ') appear as abundant as ever in the 5-minute bird counts we've done for the last 16 years.
- NZ pipit ('At risk declining ') is found in the tussock, but we don't monitor it's abundance.

So, overall the picture for the Flora looks good for the 'Threatened' and mixed for 'At risk' species. But they depend on ongoing predator control and FOF's five minute bird count monitoring shows that we can't be complacent.

Operations update – Mike Malone

A sustained period of wet weather through November and into early December caused some delays in our monitoring and trapping schedules, so the recent spell of fine weather has enabled us to get back on track. With the summer weather coming on, now is also an ideal time to complete any necessary trap calibration and maintenance - and to attend to any overdue track marking and clearance.

The good news presently is the very low rat numbers, which provides a contrast with some of our catch levels over recent years. I cannot recall seeing catches this low before, and hopefully this is reflected in this season's bird breeding. However, we are still picking up the odd stoat around the trapping fringes, so their migration into our area will undoubtedly continue.

The November forest Foot Print Tracking Tunnels (FTTs) were completed in mid-December after being postponed twice due to bad weather, with *only one set of rat prints* from the 120 cards laid out! Many thanks to those volunteers contributing their time to this crucial monitoring work.

Last month we had our delayed annual FOF Line Leaders meeting - well attended and within the Covid gathering guidelines. We extended the invitation to our regular and newer trappers, as well, so we'll make this the norm from now on to ensure a productive exchange of ideas and consistency in the field.

Many thanks to all our volunteers for their enthusiasm and commitment to maintaining our high standards, and delivering on our biodiversity enhancement goals during the past year.

Some good news from the Kea nest – Chrissy and Warren Kaneen

Since our last newsletter the barometric life of kea nest monitoring has, as expected, had its ups and downs, with some interesting footage. The batteries & the SD cards with the video footage are changed every two weeks and, as you can expect, the viewing of what the kea pair have been up to is eagerly anticipated. Are they still around? Have any pests visited? The latter is the part we really don't like to see, or, will we see some new addition/s to the nest?

Kea normally have between one to four, possibly five, eggs, with an incubation period of 22-26 days, with any young fledging at 90-100 days.

As the male was first seen feeding the female on the 4th September our hopes were high of a new addition around the end of October/November, but alas with each visit the kea couple were still maintaining this routine - sometimes with some interesting behaviour, like flapping from both birds while walking around, and the female showing submissive behaviour each time the male came near. As we believe the nest goes quite far into the rock, we could only guess what has been happening inside.

But now we do have some really good news. On the 9th December, whilst the male was feeding the female, we noticed another kea looking on, just inside the nest, and three days later the chick took its first adventure outside. So, we can confirm that we have one new kea chick....!

With the visits of two different cats to the nest entrance, and three stoats - all of whom entered the nest - plus a couple of rats, we are unaware if there were more than one egg or one chick in the nest, but we are definitely so glad to see this new addition.

The chick looks to be quite developed as it's about three quarters the size of its parents and is already flapping and trying out its wings.

Hopefully the next viewing of the cam footage will show it continuing to grow, to an active juvenile.



Alpine Project 2021/22 – Lesley Hadley and Martin Howard

The year 2021 will be remembered for many things . . . including this being the first year in which the Friends of Flora have monitored the alpine weta and lizard during the winter months. The 25 most active FTT tunnels (4 weta and 21 lizard) were selected as indicators, and their cards changed monthly – except when prevented by either snow, or Covid lockdowns.

The results were as expected, but nonetheless exciting . . . prints of both weta and lizard were present until May and then disappeared until September. The prints of both juvenile and adult gecko re-emerged in September - as well as skink prints. Weta prints also appeared in some of the higher FTTs.

Interest is growing in such smaller species and invertebrates across the motu.

FOF is unique as a volunteer group with our longer term alpine project collecting hard data for *Deinacrida tibiospina* (all species of giant weta in the South Island alpine regions are declining) and *Woodworthia* gecko. For the next season studies there are plans to not only continue our alpine FTT monitoring, but to also explore further - including night hunting - and a closer look at the food sources for these species.

So please keep an eye out for FOF Webmailer invites if you wish to contribute some time and energy to this evolving informative project.

All events take place on the Wharepapa ridge, above Mt Arthur Hut and into the Horseshoe basin, with great views over the Flora and well beyond.....

Mistletoe aplenty on Starvation Ridge – Laura Parks, DOC Biodiversity Ranger

Despite the weather initially necessitating the postponement of this study, things did improve and the mistletoe survey held mid December was a huge success...!



Laura and Steve measuring a sizeable Red Mistletoe on Starvation Ridge – photo by Chris Ecroyd.

The primary purpose was to survey the area around Starvation Ridge on the Tablelands to gauge the population size and density of *Peraxilla tetrapetala*, with a view that if sufficient individual plants were found within a small area, this would be a suitable population to monitor. A minimum of 30 plants would provide a useful data set to complement the population currently monitored by DOC Takaka on the Cobb Ridge, with a larger sample size of 50 being sufficient to monitor independently.

In total we found, tagged, and measured 82 *Peraxilla tetrapetala* all within quite a small area around Salisbury Lodge and Starvation Ridge over the three days. What was even more exciting was the presence of a few younger plants which suggests recruitment occurring within this population – something Steve Deverell has never observed in his 25 years of monitoring mistletoe in the Cobb.

Importantly, also, we sighted no evidence of possum browse, and only a few individual plants with evidence of ungulate browse - despite finding numerous plants growing within deer browse height - which was certainly encouraging for this population.



DOC Takaka Ranger, Steve Deverell, and Chris Ecroyd (FOF) next to a smaller tagged Red Mistletoe

Readers with a good memory may recall our introduction to 'Farmers for Whio' in June 2018 – new neighbours to the Friends of Flora - commencing trapping in the Graham stream catchment. The 'halo effect' is now well and truly voiced within the conservation vocabulary, referring to the dispersal of native species beyond a well trapped or fenced boundary, whether that be from Zealandia, The Brook Waimaramara, ATNP - or our own Flora Kahurangi NP territory. Under the watch of Barry Burger, here is his update on that group's activities and progress within our expanding local halo -

Farmers for Whio – Barry Burger

2021 has been a busy year for Farmers for Whio despite it having passed in a heck of a hurry! Our trapping network is still growing, with several new trap-lines put in, including one around Ngatimoti with traps built with the Ngatimoti school children earlier in the year. Their initial catches included 2 stoats by the peninsular bridge -





Other new trap-lines are located in the Skeet River and around the Baton Homestead. There is also a small group of landowners/trappers in the upper Baton/Clarke who are keen to see more whio in their area, as well as other native bird species, and they have been actively working towards this with their own trapping efforts.

The Motueka River flood event in July 2021 didn't cause as much damage as expected, however there were a few boxes that got swept away. One of these was located on the sand-spit at Motueka, and another was picked up on Jackett Island - complete with a rat in the trap! It would appear that the local whio catchments feeding into the Motueka River didn't sustain too much damage as most of the rainfall was concentrated further south in the Motueka headwaters. One positive is that the number of hedgehogs caught along the Westbank have plummeted as a result of the flooding...

At the end of last summer we surveyed the Graham catchments for whio, and found several breeding pair as well as juveniles in both the north and south branches – and more recently a pair with four ducklings have been seen regularly in Goat Creek. During winter we also surveyed the Big Pokororo, and were encouraged to find whio sign in 3 locations, as well as a pair in the south branch – a location now on the radar for future trapping.

A more recent survey up the Graham valley found several breeding pairs of Blue Duck, as well as some juveniles, which is an encouraging sign for the future of this endangered bird beyond the Kahurangi NP boundary.

Farmers for Whio have been using TrapNZ as a recording platform for our trapping network and catch data. Whilst some trappers aren't the greatest at recording their catches (!) so far for 2021 we have on record 90 mustelids – including ferrets - 369 rats, 32 hedgehogs, and 9 other.

Our trap-building operations are now based out of the old mountain valley school workshop in the Graham Valley. Here we have been building new trap-boxes as well as storing gear and doing repairs etc. Many thanks to the Mountain Valley Trust for making this available for us to use.

Finally also, many thanks to DOC and WWF for their valued assistance with funding, Friends of Rotoiti for recent donations of old trap boxes, Jason M at DOC for his thorough whio surveying, Phil C and Tasman District Council for donations of traps, the Tasman Environmental Trust as our umbrella organisation for this project, and all the landowners and trappers for their ongoing support.



All the best for 2022 and happy trapping! Barry Burger

Trap assembly at Ngatimoti School - for the full story see https://www.tet.org.nz/2021/03/31/

These traps will be used along a section of the Motueka River by Ngatimoti School, and students will be able to contribute to their local community's conservation efforts in catching and monitoring pests.

Please note: -

Ngatimoti School has been a consistently generous donor to the Friends of Flora, for which we are very grateful.

Many thanks to those contributing to this quarter's Newsletter. I enjoy collating the variety of material available and highlighting the considerable inputs invested into our conservation arena by a significant number of passionate individuals and groups - most of it otherwise running under the radar.

All the best to our readers for the New Year.

Cheers

Gerald – Editor.