

West Coast kiwi

West Coast – Tai Poutini



According to Māori legend, Tanemahuta, God of the Forest, was concerned for his children. Bugs were eating the plants and trees and making them sick. Of all the birds only the kiwi offered to lose its beautiful feathers and wings and to live in the dark on the forest floor to eat the bugs. As gratitude for the great sacrifice made by the kiwi Tanehokahoka, God of the Birds, made the kiwi the most well known and most loved bird of them all. The Haast tokoeka are kiwi and a taonga species held in special reserve by the Māori people. They are flightless, nocturnal and unique to this area of New Zealand.

Tokoeka –

weka with a walking stick

Fight for survival

Haast tokoeka have been living in South Westland long before human inhabitation of New Zealand. They were a significant food source for the Māori people and early European explorers until the early 1900s when numbers started to decline. Today the Haast tokoeka is ranked by DOC as nationally critical. There is an estimated population of around 300 Haast tokoeka birds that are fighting for survival due to introduced predators such as stoats. The young chicks are vulnerable to stoats until they reach 1 kg in weight at

which time they can usually defend themselves. Dogs and ferrets are a major threat to both chicks and adult kiwi.

Recovery Plan & Operation Nest Egg

Currently 63 Haast tokoeka are monitored to establish chick and juvenile survival, increases into the adult population, nesting success, and population dynamics. These birds carry radio transmitters which allow them to be tracked with minimal disturbance. Once the nests are located, chick hatching is monitored using infra-red cameras. Chicks are then caught by hand and fitted with transmitters for further tracking. This provides scientists with the vital information they need to determine whether Haast tokoeka can maintain and increase their numbers with the current level of stoat control.

Eight pairs of breeding adults have been selected for Bank of New Zealand Save The Kiwi Trust Operation Nest Egg Programme, where kiwi eggs are artificially incubated and reared in captivity for release back into the wild when they have reached a weight at which they can withstand predators. Through Operation Nest Egg and an intensive trapping programme the current population will be safeguarded. In the future a second population will be established on an offshore or predator-free mainland island.

Haast Tokoeka Sanctuary

The Haast Tokoeka Sanctuary is one of five kiwi sanctuaries established throughout New Zealand. Situated 25 kilometres from Haast, it covers an area of 11,400 hectares between the Waiatoto and Arahata rivers, climbing from sea-level to the top of the Haast range.

Tokoeka facts

- They have a brown/grey plumage with a reddish tinge. Loose hair like feathers and long whiskers.
- All birds have external nostrils – kiwi are unique (and have a good sense of smell) because their nostrils are placed near the tip of the bill, rather than at the base. The female's bill is longer than the male's.

Tokoeka P. Tisch





Tokoeka

- They are nocturnal and have small eyes but good vision in the day and night. They also have well-developed hearing.
- Adults weigh in at around 3 kg for female and 2.3 kg for the male. The chicks are a miniature version of the adult.
- They are flightless and have only minute wings and no tail.
- The egg averages around 20% of the female's body weight and takes between 75 to 85 days to hatch.
- They mostly eat earthworms, beetle larvae and cicada nymphs.
- The male does a major part of the incubation, sitting on the nest during the day and for the first part of the night, after which time the female sits on the nest until a few hours before dawn.
- They are long-lived, with recent telemetry studies suggesting that some birds live over 40 years.
- A bird may have a territory as large as 100 hectares which it will defend from other birds.

Pest management

It is estimated that 95% of kiwi chicks that hatch in the wild die before they are six months old, 70% of which are killed by stoats. In order to maintain a viable living population on the mainland in their traditional environment an intensive trapping programme has been established. Over 750 stoat control tunnels each containing two traps have been placed along 130 km of tracks situated through out the sanctuary and surrounding area. The traps are baited with either rabbit meat or hen eggs and are checked twice a month from October to April and monthly for the five months over winter.

Rats are a by-catch of the trapping programme. They are major competitors for food by eating fallen fruit, small insects and invertebrates that the kiwi also feed upon.

Possums, which can destroy and eat kiwi eggs, displace adult kiwi from normal burrows and compete for food, are also controlled by application of poisons.

Rowi

Rowi (Okarito brown kiwi) are New Zealand's rarest kiwi, with just an estimated 250 birds surviving in just 10,000 hectares in South Okarito Forest, northwest of Franz Josef township. It was only in 1994 that they were found to be an entirely new species and given the name rowi.

Rowi vary from other types of kiwi in a range of ways. The most obvious difference is that rowi have grayish feathers and often have patches of white feathers on their faces. They also feel soft to touch, whereas North

Island brown kiwi have coarse feathers. Both male and female rowi take turns to look after their egg, whereas the male incubates the egg in most other kiwi varieties.

Operation nest egg

The greatest threat to kiwi on the West Coast is stoat predation. Stoats were bought to New Zealand to help in the control of rabbits but unfortunately our native birds are also easy prey. Although adult kiwi are strong enough to defend themselves, kiwi chicks are extremely vulnerable. In the wild, only ten per cent of chicks make it to six months, and only five per cent reach adulthood.

To protect kiwi eggs and chicks from stoat predation, DOC with the help of the Bank of New Zealand has instigated a program called Operation Nest Egg. Eggs are removed from nests at Okarito and Haast and delivered to Willowbank Wildlife Park in Christchurch. There the eggs are artificially incubated until they hatch.

The chicks are then released onto an offshore island where they can grow in a wild environment free from the threat of introduced predators. Rowi are transferred to Motuara Island in the Marlborough Sounds, while tokoeka chicks are sent to Centre Island in Lake Te Anau.

Once the kiwi chicks reach the safe weight of one kilogram, they are big enough to defend themselves against stoats and are released back into their natural habitat at the near Haast or Okarito.

Chicks hatched through Operation Nest Egg are coming into breeding age and the number of eggs they are producing is increasing each year.

How can you help?

Community involvement is important for kiwi survival. Here are some ways that you can help:

- Find out about kiwi in your area and assist in their recovery by recording their calls and sightings.
- Do not release unwanted cats into the wild.
- Keep your dog tied up at night and on a leash when walking in the bush. Dogs are strictly prohibited from any kiwi sanctuary.
- Encourage the safeguarding of kiwi habitat in your area.

Further information

To learn more about rowi and Haast tokoeka, contact the Franz Josef Visitor Centre or Haast Visitor Centre Department of Conservation offices, or visit www.doc.govt.nz.



Rowi C. Wickes