

June 2008

Te Potae o Awarua

A Project in the North West Ruahine

What is it?

Te Potae o Awarua roughly translated means 'the protection of the Awarua lands' and is the name given to a joint initiative by the Department of Conservation (DOC) and the Aorangi Awarua Trust (hereafter referred to as the 'Trust'). Originally established as part of a research project looking at the effect of bait in stoat traps, it has provided a stepping stone to the establishment of a partnership that capitalizes on the knowledge and understanding of both DOC and the Trust.

What will it achieve?

The research side of the project tests the theory that stoats, inquisitive by nature, will enter traps regardless of whether or not they contain bait. If proven, future stoat trapping will become much easier and costs will greatly reduce. However, the goal has grown to develop this site into a protection area. This has become known as the Te Potae Project (Potae also being the name of one of the central high points on the track, distinguished by its unusual rock outcrops).



*Anna Mackintosh heads up the Te Potae Track.
Photo: Vivienne McGlynn.*

Why this area?

In addition to the research benefits from the initial layout, our vision for the Te Potae Project is to work towards an integrated pest management area of 20,000ha. The project area is centred on the North West corner of the Ruahine Ranges, which is celebrated for its biodiversity values. The area supports a diverse range of habitats and this diversity also supports a large number of rare and threatened plant and animal species. Of particular interest are the protection of a remnant population of East Coast North Island Brown Kiwi (ECNIK) - the southern most known population - and whio populations, which are dispersed throughout this area. We aim to continue to develop our relationship with the local and wider community. We also wish to gather existing knowledge and open up new areas by focusing more research and development in this area in an attempt to learn more about the species and habitats to aim management decisions.

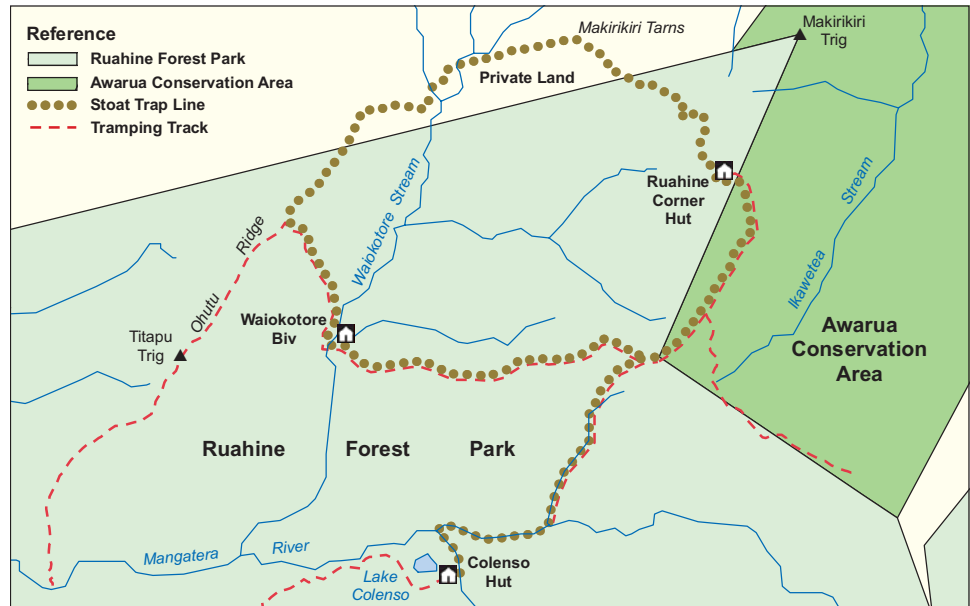
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Stage one - completed

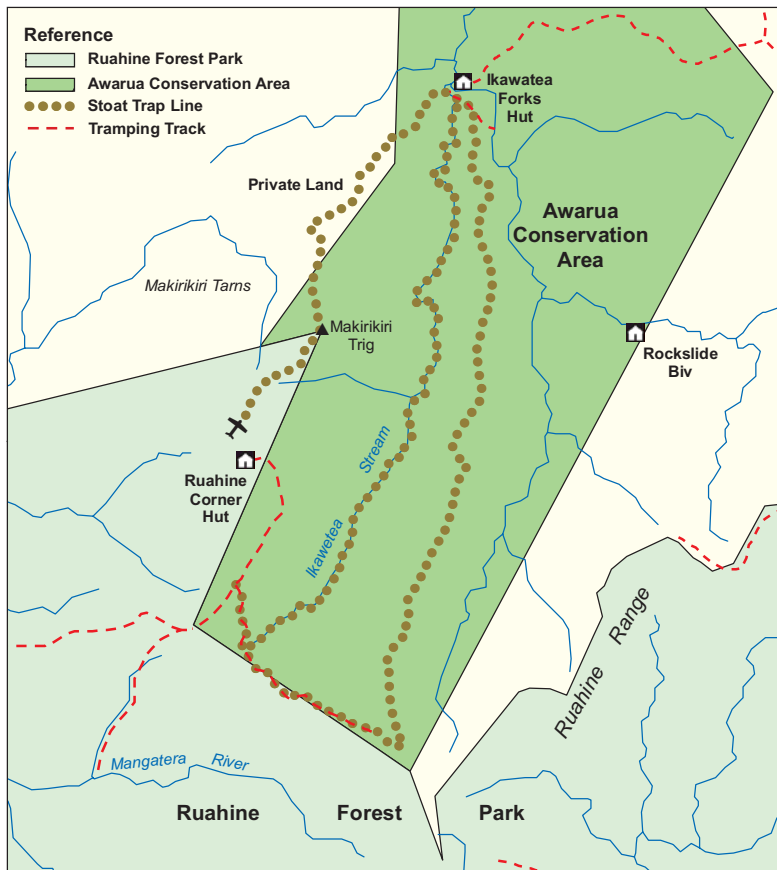
In February 2007, the initial 20km trapline was set up (see below). Every second trap is bait free, with fresh eggs baiting the remaining traps. Once a month, a helicopter flies volunteers into the area to check, re-bait and record trap-catch information. Trap catch includes hedgehogs, rats and stoats, and has increased over time. They are caught in both baited and un-baited traps, but it is too early to draw conclusions.



The initial trap line (2007).

Stage Two

In March 2008, DOC staff and volunteers added an additional ~30km trap line encircling the Ikawetea Gully (see below).



The extended trap line (2008).

Two hundred and sixty two DOC 200 single set traps were spaced 100 meters apart. Again, every second trap was baited with a fresh egg. This new trap line covers rougher terrain and is off the beaten track so a higher level of fitness and orienteering skills are required. Checking will begin this year (2008).



A view from the top of the main range (Asber Morley, Clayton Gibson and Ken Mills).

Photo: Darren Peters.

Ruahine Kiwi

Ruahine kiwi are Eastern North Island Brown Kiwi (*Apteryx mantelli*) - one of four “types” or “races” - and this population represents the furthest south in range of this race of kiwi. It is likely that past kiwi chick survival in the Ruahine Forest Park has been low due to high predator numbers. Without intervention, extinction is a possibility. Predator control and Operation Nest Egg (ONE) are two commonly used methods for maintaining and boosting kiwi numbers. ONE involves removing kiwi eggs from the wild, hatching them in captivity and raising the chicks until they are over 800g (when they are better able to defend themselves from stoats), then returning them to the wild.



*Tama Wipaki, Aorangi Awarua Trust and Pob the kiwi dog helping to put transmitters on a kiwi.
Photo: Rebecca Lewis.*

The eggs were successfully hatched and three 900g kiwi chicks were released back into the area they came from in March 2008. They are individually micro-chipped so they can be identified if they are ever found again. One of the previously radio-tagged adult male kiwi had re-nested and on the trip to return the kiwi chicks, the team found that the nest had a single egg in it, which had hatched! The chick was named Hine.

Over the next few years, these young ONE kiwi will boost the existing Ruahine kiwi population, and together with the Te Potae o Awarua predator trapping programme, the survival rate of kiwi chicks hatching in the Ruahine Forest Park will improve.

As well as boosting the Ruahine kiwi population, other bird species such as whio and kaka will also benefit from this programme. Recorded whio sightings are rising significantly with the monthly trips providing us with more information on regular whio hangouts. We hope to be able to see an improvement over time revealed through surveys and species sightings for more of our threatened species.



A pair of whio. Photo: Brian Churchbouse.

How can you help?

The Trust and DOC welcome assistance with this project in the following ways:

1. Monthly trap checking, species monitoring trips.

If you have a high level of fitness and are keen for some back country hiking you can register to help on one of the monthly trap checking trips. These take 2-4 days with parties accessing the area by helicopter.

2. Sponsorship.

Several agencies and individuals have already been generous with donations of money for traps and materials and essential supplies such as helicopter flights and eggs for bait. Any additional offers of sponsorship would be welcomed by DOC and the Aorangi Awarua Trust and would help the project get maximum results. If you or your company would like to sponsor this project please contact the DOC office at the address given below.

3. Protection of stoat traps.

If you are in this area for recreational purposes we ask that you stay clear of the stoat traps. They can cause injury if set off accidentally. Research data could also be affected.

4. Information.

Any feedback from recreational users of this area regarding damage to traps or sightings of rare and threatened species would be greatly appreciated.

Further information

For further information contact:

Programme Manager Biodiversity
Palmerston North Area Office
Department of Conservation
Ph 06 3509700
www.doc.govt.nz

Thank you to the sponsors for their generous contributions to Te Potae o Awarua and to all the volunteers who have kindly donated their time, energy and enthusiasm to this project.

