

Saving Whio on the Styx and Oparara rivers



West Coast / Tai Poutini

Blue duck (whio) are found only in fast-flowing rivers of New Zealand. Possessing a number of unusual characteristics and behaviours, whio have no close relatives anywhere in the world. Sadly whio today are increasingly threatened throughout their range due to predation by introduced mammals, human disturbance and loss of habitat. Many populations of whio are now at critical levels and management of the birds is essential to ensure the species' survival. The Department of Conservation has chosen two key spots on the West Coast to monitor and protect whio: the Styx Valley, which is a 40-minute drive south-east of Hokitika, and the Oparara River, located deep in Kahurangi National Park, near Karamea. Both of these programs aim to control predation of whio and to monitor nesting success in order to help these whio populations recover.

Styx River Project

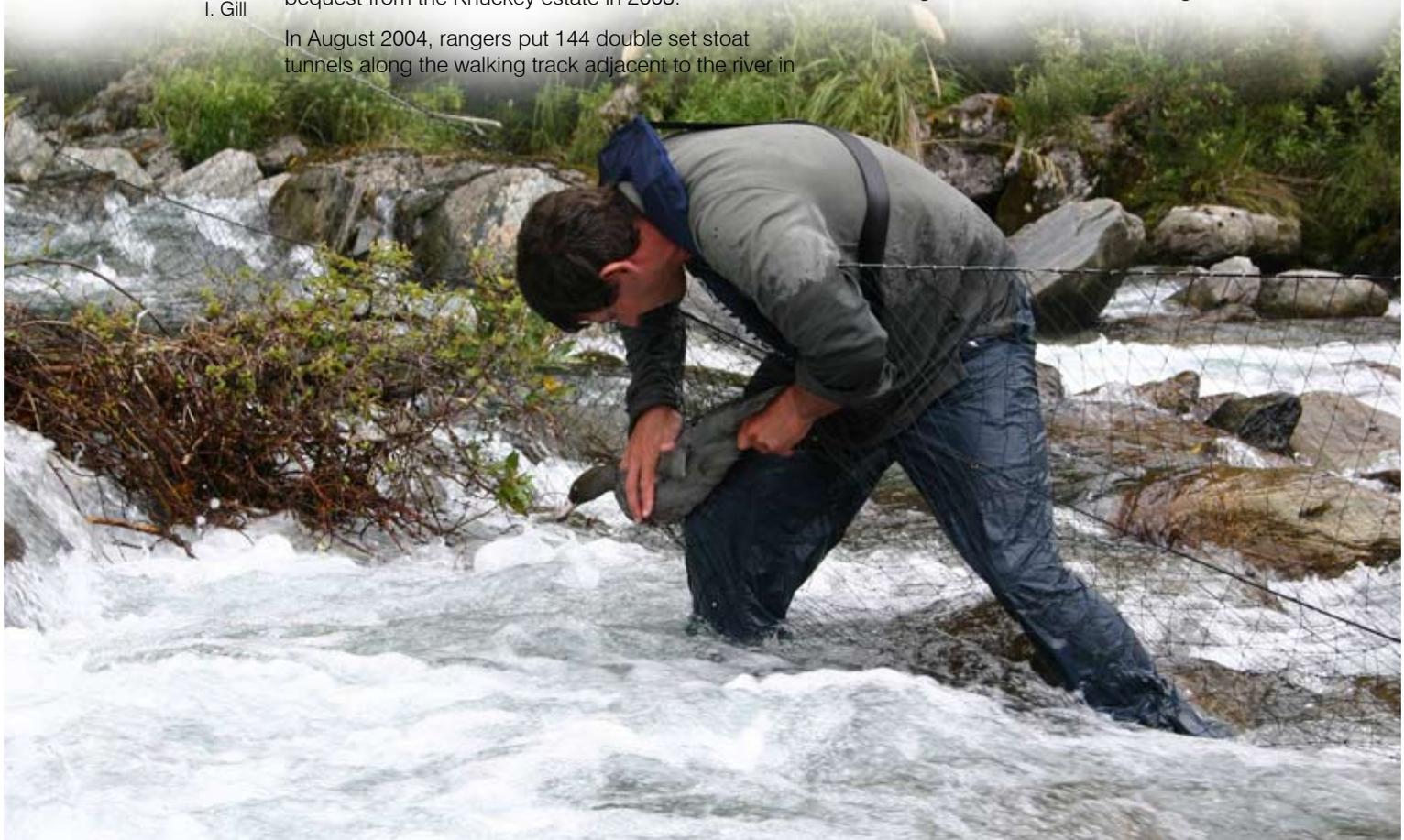
The Styx River project was established in 2004 in order to protect whio. The long-term goal of the Styx River project is to contribute to protecting habitat that can sustain up to 30 pairs of whio. As the Styx is not large enough on its own to provide habitat for 30 pairs, the Arahura catchment is also included in the project area. The project's foundation was a generous bequest from the Knuckey estate in 2003.

I. Gill

In August 2004, rangers put 144 double set stoat tunnels along the walking track adjacent to the river in

order to protect nesting whio. The traps are checked every fortnight in the summer and every month over the winter. In November 2005 an additional 120 tunnels were put down the true left of the Styx and before the end of May 2006 a trap line containing 260 tunnels will be in place in the Arahura River. By April 2006 they had caught in excess of 78 stoats, 250 rats and one ferret.

The difficult work of locating, catching and banding birds began in 2004 so that breeding could be



accurately monitored. A total of 20 who have been banded on the Styx River to date. This has been incredibly helpful for identifying pair bonds and territory size within the Styx Valley. Up until now the focus has been on predator trapping and establishing the new lines. In the future there will be a bigger focus on nest monitoring. A ranger with a specially trained who dog will be used to try and locate nests and then subsequently determine the outcome of any nests found. It is hoped that with the extra tunnels in place, who will have a much greater chance of breeding success in future years.

Oparara Protection Program

The Oparara River and its tributaries are one of the few strongholds for South Island who. The river system once supported a significant who population, making it an ideal spot for a recovery program. In 2002, an extensive predator and who monitoring program was established in the Oparara Valley with funding from Solid Energy.

Each month DOC staff check and clear 423 stoat tunnels along 42 kilometres of river, tracks and access roads. Each tunnel contains two Fenn traps which target stoats, the key predator of who. Between August 2002 and April 2006, 346 stoats were caught.

Coupled with this pest control, the DOC team is monitoring who breeding success. Adult birds are banded and females are equipped with backpack-like transmitters so that DOC rangers can keep track of individuals and detect breeding. If nesting is observed, the site is located and regularly checked. Just prior to fledging the family group are caught and transponders inserted into fledglings. Transponders allow us to figure out if unbanded birds in the Oparara are new birds or those returning to their natal area. To date juveniles have largely dispersed out of the management site meaning that we cannot guarantee

annual recapture and replacement of leg bands.

The ducks seem to be responding well to the predator control in the Oparara. In 2006 eight who pairs were monitored and 21 ducklings were produced, an increase from the three pairs monitored and the three ducklings produced in 2005. Several high rainfall events in January 2006 led to high river flows and likely the loss of two nests and three ducklings. At the end of the breeding season 15 ducklings had fledged.

Since May 2003, this project has been one of the 'virtual field trips' offered to schools as part of the LEARNZ online education program. Students can take part in audio conferences with DOC staff and log on to the daily website updates of video footage, photos and work taking place.

Did you know?

You may have noticed the coloured bands that DOC officers sometimes place on birds' legs in order to monitor individuals. These bands, which tend to wear quickly, are placed on breeding pairs and checked annually. They are no longer used on juvenile birds which disperse over large distances and may not return to the managed area.

Transponders are tiny microchips that are placed under the bird's skin in order to identify individual birds, without the risks associated with non-maintained bands. The tiny microchip is encased in a sterile inert glass capsule and can be inserted quickly and simply under the who's skin with little or no discomfort. Twelve who in the Oparara area have already been issued with transponders with great success.

You can help

If you are visiting the Styx Valley or Kahurangi National Park, or other areas on the West Coast on a tramping or hunting trip you might like to keep an eye out for who. Do everything possible to avoid disturbing them but let us know where and when you see them.

Take a note of how many you see, where they are and the time of day. You can use the online report form at www.blueduck.org.nz, or phone the Hokitika Area Office (03 756 8282) or the Buller Area Office (03 788 8008) to report the sightings.

Further information

For more information about blue duck research and recovery programs on the West Coast, contact the DOC Hokitika Area Office (03 756 8282) or the Buller Area Office (03 788 8008) or visit www.doc.govt.nz.

Blue duck family
P Simpson



I. Gill

