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The return of fairy prions to Mana Island

What are fairy prions?

Fairy prions (titiwainui, *Pachyptila turtur*) are among New Zealand's most abundant and smallest petrels, weighing between 100 and 160 grams. They have a blue-grey head and back, a white throat and belly, a black M-shaped mark across their wings, and a broad black tip to their tail. They spend most of their lives at sea, and nest in caves or burrows on islands.



Fairy prion adult (left) and chick.
Photos: Colin Miskelly.

Although there are around a million pairs of fairy prion on Takapourewa (Stephens Island), they no longer breed on the Wellington side of Cook Strait. Fairy prions and other burrowing seabirds are 'keystone' species for island ecosystems. Their burrows create homes for lizards, tuatara and insects, and because they feed at sea and nest in colonies, they create very fertile ecosystems by delivering nutrients to the land in the form of droppings, spilt regurgitations, addled eggs and corpses.

Why transfer fairy prions to Mana Island?

Returning fairy prions to Mana Island, over three years, is part of a larger restoration programme to recreate an ecosystem typical of Cook Strait islands before human impact. The bones of fairy prions have been found in middens on the island, indicating that there were colonies on the island before they were obliterated by 500 years of human habitation and farming. Mana Island, off Wellington's west coast, is a 217-ha scientific reserve administered by DOC.

By transferring fully grown chicks from Takapourewa and hand feeding them on Mana until they fledge, it is hoped the prions will think Mana is their home colony and will return there instead of Takapourewa. The first 40 chicks arrived on Mana on 13 January 2002 in a trial transfer with Ngati Koata of Marlborough handing over their kaitiakitanga (guardianship) of the birds to Ngati Toa of Porirua. All the birds fledged after being hand fed for up to three weeks. Another 100 transferred in January 2003 also fledged, and a similar number will be transferred in January 2004. This is the first time any species of prion has been transferred, but a similar programme to transfer chicks of diving petrels (kuaka, *Pelecanoides urinatrix*) to Mana Island during 1997-99 has been successful.

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When will they return?

Little is known about the age at which fairy prions return to their breeding colonies but they are not expected to return to land for two to three years. It is hoped that the first birds will return in 2004. They are thought to start breeding when they are about five years old.



Lance Mundy and Shelley Meehan feeding a prion chick, Mana Island.

Photo: Rex Williams

Right royal treatment

In the three weeks prior to fledging, the fairy prions are looked after by teams of dedicated volunteers, mainly from the Friends of Mana Island Society and the Ornithological Society. Kept in artificial burrows, the chicks are fed daily on sardine



Fairy prion chick ready to fledge, Mana Island.

Photo: Rex Williams

smoothies, a diet developed during the trial transfer. The first 40 chicks were divided into two groups—20 were fed krill and the remaining 20 tinned sardines, to assess which diet would best suit future transfers. Both diets were successful, but the sardine diet produced significantly heavier chicks at fledging than the diet of krill. The wings of sardine-fed chicks also grew slightly faster. Sardines are easily obtained at supermarkets (whereas there is only one krill supplier in New Zealand), and the tins are easy to transport and store, requiring no refrigeration or freezing, unlike the krill. Preparation of the sardine diet is simple—one tin of sardines blended with 60 ml of water feeds four chicks a day.

Who is behind the project?

The project is being funded by the Friends of Mana Island through grants and donations, with support from DOC, the Ornithological Society, Ngati Toa and Ngati Koata.

The Friends of Mana Island is an incorporated society established to assist in the restoration of Mana Island. For more information about the Friends of Mana Island, visit their website: www.manaisland.org.nz/