

Takahē

Native birds

The flightless takahē is a colourful green and blue bird with an impressive red beak and short stout legs. This unique bird was thought to be extinct until 1948 when a medical doctor from Invercargill, Geoffrey Orbell, re-discovered the species in the alpine tussock grasslands of the remote Murchison Mountains, Fiordland. Today, takahē numbers are increasing in their natural habitat thanks to a Department of Conservation captive breeding programme and intensive predator control. The public can see this rare bird at the Department of Conservation Wildlife Centre (Te Anau) and at the National Wildlife Centre (Mount Bruce, near Masterton).

Where are they found?

Takahē once lived throughout the North and South Islands but by the time of Māori settlement, they were already reduced in numbers and localised in distribution. After their rediscovery in 1948, the Murchison Mountains were made a Specially Protected Area, with entry by permit only. Annual surveys by the Department of Conservation have shown that for the past decade the wild population in the protected area has managed to average about

130 birds, although numbers have fluctuated between 110 and 171. Overall however, takahē numbers have climbed to more than 280 with a second population being established on offshore islands. This population was established during the 1980s and 1990s on four offshore islands: Maud Island (Marlborough Sounds), Mana Island (off Wellington's west coast), Kapiti Island (north of Mana), and Tiritiri Matangi Island (Hauraki Gulf). These sites also provide opportunities for the public to see takahē.

Takahē D. Crouchley



Takahē facts

- Takahē get their food and shelter from alpine grassland species such as broad-leaved snow tussock, mid-ribbed snow tussock and curled snow tussock.
- After the snow clears in spring, takahē will often nest under the shelter of snow tussocks where each nesting pair builds up a raised bowl of grasses.
- The female bird usually lays one to three eggs, of which approximately 80% hatch. The 30-day incubation period is shared by both parents who also feed the chicks for 3 months. Usually only one chick per breeding pair will survive its first winter.
- A takahē looks similar to the common black and blue pūkeko but is much larger. An adult stands about 50 cm high and can weigh up to 3 kilograms.
- Takahē in captivity have lived to be 20 years old, but in the wild few birds reach this age.
- Takahē only use their wings for displays such as courtship and aggression.

Threats

Like many of New Zealand's unique bird species, being large, flightless and slow to reproduce, the takahē succumbed to the impacts of harvesting, land clearance and the introduction of predators that came with human occupation. They survived in the remote



In 2005 a significant sponsorship partnership for takahē was announced: Takahē Mitre 10 Rescue. This relationship between DOC and Mitre 10 was made possible by the New Zealand National Parks and Conservation Foundation
www.mitre10.co.nz



Murchison Mountains due to their isolation from many of these factors.

Early estimates suggest that the takahē population in Fiordland may have declined by about 60% in the 30 years following their rediscovery. During this period various research projects were carried out to develop an understanding of the biology of the species and causes of decline. Threats from predation by stoats and competition for food with high numbers of red deer were apparent and control measures were undertaken.

What is DOC doing?

Today the Department of Conservation's takahē recovery plan focuses on expanding self-sustaining populations in Fiordland and on predator-free islands and other secure lowland sites.

A great deal of effort goes into predator control, especially deer control, in order to protect and maintain vegetation. The improvement in habitat has helped increase takahē breeding success

and survival, contributing to the current improved population status.

Manipulation of takahē nests has been done since 1983 in an attempt to boost recovery. After identifying what eggs are viable or added, failed eggs are removed so the birds do not waste energy trying to hatch these. Occasionally eggs may be moved between nests to ensure pairs have at least one good egg.

Any excess eggs are artificially reared at the Burwood Captive Rearing Unit near Te Anau. Puppet models of adult takahē are used by carers during feeding to prevent the chicks from attaching to humans. Recordings of wild birds are also played to the chicks as they are hatched and when they are being fed. In addition, all chicks spend at least a little time with one of the captive pairs of birds as foster parents.

The birds are released at one year of age either in Fiordland or on the predator-free islands. As with the transfer or release of any bird, many takahē can die in the first year or two on their own (up to 50 per cent). Enough birds survive however, to make the project worthwhile. The success of the birds is monitored through banding and fitting a sample of the birds with radio transmitters.

The combination of stoat and deer control, captive breeding and the use of predator-free islands means the Department has been able to more than double the number of birds from the low in the early 1980s.

How can you help?

One way to help assist takahē is to join one of the volunteer groups working to protect the species on offshore islands. Two such non-profit groups are 'Friends of Mana Island' and 'Supporters of Tiritiri Matangi'. (Mana Island is located off Wellington's west coast and Tiritiri Matangi Island is located 30km north east of Central Auckland.) Both these volunteer groups can be contacted via their official web sites at www.manaisland.org.nz or www.tiritirimatangi.org.nz.

Further information

For further information about this endangered species visit the DOC website at www.doc.govt.nz.

J. Maxwell



Puppet-feeding chick D. Eason

