



Zealandia in Wellington

Safety in numbers

New Zealand nature sanctuaries provide hope for threatened bird species

STELLA MARTIN

It's a wonderful moment when one of the rarest birds in the world emerges from the bushes. With a beak like red-enamelled secateurs, it delicately nibbles at grass seeds less than 1m from me. Takahe were once abundant throughout New Zealand, but by the end of the 19th century were considered extinct. They were not alone. Over half of New Zealand's bird species, along with indigenous reptiles, amphibians and insects, have vanished since the arrival of humans.

Life evolved in New Zealand in a unique way. The only native land mammals are two small bats; birds ruled the roost. Early European visitors were entranced by the dawn chorus, naturalist Joseph Banks describing, in 1770, "the most melodious wild music I have ever heard ... the most tuneable silver sound imaginable". Sadly, the naive, often flightless, birds stood little chance against mammal predators — the rats, stoats, weasels, ferrets, cats, dogs and possums — that humans brought with them. As much natural habitat was destroyed, and introduced European species took their place, the survivors were largely reduced to small, vulnerable populations on isolated islands.

Now, however, efforts are being made to reverse this. Predators have been eliminated from more than 70 islands and, more recently, from heavily fenced mainland sanctuaries. Threatened or endangered species have been translocated into these areas, and are thriving. While most of these sanctuaries are off limits, a few are open to visitors, offering an opportunity to glimpse a long-lost New Zealand.

In addition to rescued takahe, there are more than a dozen birds that have become extinct or rare on the mainland. New Zealand robins (toutouwai) are so tame they may even perch on a visitor's boot; brightly wattled saddlebacks (tieke) and kokako are last survivors of an ancient order. There are jaunty stitchbirds (hihi); chiming bellbirds (korimako); flitting flocks of whiteheads (popokotea) and tiny, 6g riflemen (tipitounamu). Plus chattering, red-crowned parakeets (kakariki); kaka, which are large parrots ever-ready to snatch unguarded food; and inquisitive, ground-dwelling weka. There's also the world's rarest duck, the brown teal (pateke); and kiwis, of course, which sleep in their burrows by day, but can be seen on conducted night-time tours.

Although it resembles a lizard, the tuatara belongs to a separate branch of the reptile family with ancient (220 million years) roots; its only known relatives are fossils.



DENIS WALLS

A takahe, left, and a kakariki, right, at Zealandia; Tiritiri Matangi Island reserve, below



DENIS WALLS



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Only those on islands survived but sanctuaries are boosting numbers again. On the rescue list is another living relic, the weta, a type of cricket unchanged for 190 million years. The largest, the mouse-sized wetapunga, is one of the heaviest insects in the world. The sanctuaries are, in general, managed by the Department of Conservation, some in partnership with a voluntary community group or non-for-profit trusts.

NORTH ISLAND

TIRITIRI MATANGI ISLAND: Just a one-hour ferry ride from central Auckland, this 220ha island has been almost completely revegetated by volunteers who now share their knowledge with visitors on guided walks. In addition to 12 translocated endemic bird species, several more native species have found their own way there. Wooden boxes along the shoreline provide shelters for nesting and moulting little blue penguins; a window on the top allows an up-close view. It is possible to stay on the island in a basic bunkerhouse.

More: tiritirimatangi.org.nz

KAPATI ISLAND: Access to Kapati is by permit only; visitors should book via a commercial operator. Boats are launched (weather permitting) from Paraparaumu Beach, one hour north of Auckland. The 1965ha island has been a wildlife sanctuary since 1897. The only residents are a local Maori family who run a lodge with mod-

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est accommodation and meals for visitors as well as kiwi-spotting tours after dark (sightings by no means guaranteed). Walking tracks, including to the highest point, Tuteremoana at 521m, offer visitors the chance to encounter a variety of birds, particularly at busy supplementary feeding stations. The adjacent Kapiti Marine Reserve covers 2167ha.

More: kapitiislandnaturetours.co.nz; kapitiexplorer.nz

ZEALANDIA: This 225ha haven is just 10 minutes from central Wellington. A 2.2m-high fence excludes 13 pest mammal species; more than 40 threatened plant and animal species have been reintroduced, the first time many have returned to the wild on mainland New Zealand. Tuataras breed inside a special enclosure and can also be spotted around the park, as can various geckos, including the stunning Wellington green gecko, and various weta species. Birds are attracted to busy feeders. Visitors can wander along 32km of tracks around two lakes, join free guided tours, learn more in the excellent interpretative centre, and even return for night tours.

More: visitzealandia.com

SOUTH ISLAND

ULVA ISLAND: Stewart Island is 30km across the Foveaux Strait from the tip of the South Island and from there it's five minutes by water taxi to 267ha Ulva Island, or Te Wharawhara. Ulva Island has never been logged, and its mature forest distinguishes it from revegetated island sanctuaries. Of particular interest among reintroduced, threatened bird, are South Island endemics such as the yellowhead and brown creeper; South Island subspecies of saddlebacks and kaka; and local specialities, the Stewart Island robin and Stewart Island brown kiwi.

More: doc.govt.nz

OROKONUI ECOSANCTUARY: Highlights at this fully fenced 307ha sanctuary, 20km north of Dunedin, are reintroduced animals endemic to the South Island. These include a variety of reptiles, including the Otago skink, jewelled gecko, and free-ranging tuatara, as well as captive-reared individuals in a viewing pen. Birds include the South Island kaka, saddleback and tomtit (miromiro), brown creeper and rare Haast brown kiwi. Visitors can follow a network of paths past busy feeding stations, visit New Zealand's tallest tree (an 80.5m mountain ash) and join a guided tour. More: orokonui.nz

• doc.govt.nz

• newzealand.com