



SANCTUARY COVE: The ferry takes an hour from Auckland (top); and volunteers replanted the island with native trees

Back from the

THE takahe is one of the most endangered birds in the world — there are only 220 left — and one is walking around my table as I eat my lunch.

They may be endangered, but takahe are not shy. It's a characteristic which may have contributed to their downfall, along with their apparently poor parenting skills.

The birds were considered extinct until a small population was discovered in 1948 in the remote mountains of New Zealand's South Island. To ensure their survival, some have been transferred to sanctuaries on offshore islands.

Sixty now live on Tiritiri Matangi Island.

This island, just 30km north of New Zealand's largest city, Auckland, is a scientific reserve open to the public. Here New Zealanders can discover native birds, many of which are rarely, if ever, seen on the mainland.

In the past, Maori settlement and European farming practices had reduced most of the native forest on the 220ha island to rolling grassland.

But since the Conservation Department initiated a revegetation program in 1984, more than 250,000 trees have been planted. The forest is thriving.

Life evolved in New Zealand in a

New Zealand was once the land of birds. Hard work has recreated this lost world on Tiritiri Matangi Island. **Bridget Martin goes twitching**

unique way. There are few reptiles and the only native mammals are two small bats.

Birds ruled the roost. Early European visitors were entranced by the dawn chorus, with Joseph Banks writing in 1770: "The numbers of them were certainly very great who seemed to strain their throats... the most melodious wild musick I have ever heard... with the most tuneable silver sound imaginable."

Maori hunters, and introduced rats, started the decline in a bird population so unused to predators that many had lost the ability to fly.

European stoats, weasels, ferrets, cats and dogs and Australian possums, together with extensive vegetation clearing, brought devastation.

In most of the country, introduced European birds are virtually the only ones to be seen.

But on Tiritiri Matangi, a dedicated band of visionary volunteers, up to a thousand strong, has recreated a lost world.

We set off in the company of one of these volunteers. Jan is a plant propagator but, as well as

numerous weekend visits, she takes off two weeks a year to work on the island, doing anything from track repairs to recording bird numbers.

As we follow the track to Hobbs Beach, Jan stops us beside a couple of wooden boxes.

She lifts a lid and we peer through the glass top to see two little blue penguins.

They climb into these artificial rock shelters to nest in spring but the ones we see are using these shelters while they moult.

This process takes two weeks, during which the birds cannot go to sea or feed.

Behind Hobbs Beach we peer up into a massive pohutukawa tree, the New Zealand Christmas tree so named because it is covered with red blossoms at the end of the year.

Something dark and blue zooms into the branches. It is a tui, one of the few New Zealand native birds still seen on the mainland.

This one fluffs out its collar of white curling feathers highlighted against its dark iridescent plumage.

brink on Tiritiri



RARE BIRDS: This takahe is one of only 220 in the world; and brown teal are among the world's rarest waterfowl



As we leave the beach and follow our guide into the forest, a rapid twittering alerts us to the presence of much rarer birds.

Once common throughout the North Island, stitchbirds have been extinct on the mainland for more than a century.

Flashing their bright yellow wing patches, the males engage in a little competition before flying off.

Saddlebacks, named for their chestnut backs, have also been brought to Tiritiri and that is the next treat in store for us. One stands on a branch so close we can easily see the two fleshy, orange wattles at the base of its bill.

Deep in the forest we get a momentary glimpse of the kokako, one of the most sought-after sights of the island. These secretive, grey birds show

themselves only rarely. We get a rapid glimpse of the distinctive black bandit mask and blue chin wattles before it flaps back into the canopy.

"We planted all of this," Jan says proudly as we join the Ridge Track. We are surrounded by a small forest of cabbage trees, taraire, kohekohe and puriri — names as strange as their foliage. Walking back through the forest

to the wharf I am suddenly ambushed by a bird wave. Bellbirds chime all around, imitated by a flock of tuis. Fantails flit past me and a North Island robin, another introduction, momentarily perches on a nearby sapling.

A time machine has whisked me back to a long-lost New Zealand. It is a wonderful moment on this very magical island.

TIRITIRI MATANGI IS



GETTING THERE: Freedom Air flies from Brisbane to Auckland six days a week. A Fullers Ferry runs from Auckland to Tiritiri Matangi via Gulf Harbour on the Whangaparaoa Peninsula on Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays, with additional services in summer. A return ticket from Auckland costs about \$A50 an adult, \$25 a child. Family tickets and concessions are available.

BOOKINGS: Phone +64 9367 9111, +64 9424 5561 or freephone 0800 424 5561 within NZ; or visit www.fullers.co.nz

TOURS: Guided tours on the island cost about \$5/\$2.50.

ACCOMMODATION: The limited bunkhouse accommodation is booked well in advance. Phone +64 9476 0010. No food is available on the island.

DETAILS: Visit the website www.tiritirimatangi.org.nz