

The call of toutouwai (NI robin) can once again be heard on Moturua Island in Ipipiri. Toutouwai have been there before, but numbers got so low when rats were on the island that they failed to recover when the pests were removed. In June 43 birds came to Moturua from Pureora Forest, at the request of the Guardians and local hapu Ngati Kuta and Patukeha to Rereahu iwi from Pureora and the Department of Conservation.

This is the first wild to wild translocation as part of a 20 year plan for Project Island Song to bring back the birds to the islands of Ipipiri. Dr Kevin Parker from Parker Conservation and Massey University was engaged to lead the translocation and to provide training for kaimahi (conservation workers) and rangatahi (young people) from Te Rawhiti and Pureroa.



Planning for the project began 18 months ago when Lindsay Alexander started work on the translocation application to DOC. Richard Robbins, Project Coordinator for Project Island Song picked up the planning side and Richard (Blandy) Witehira initiated korero (discussion) with Rereahu iwi.

Blandy organised a hikoi to Pureora in February this year for the Rawhiti people to korero about the toutouwai translocation – to whangai or adopt the birds and care for them as their own. It also gave the Rawhiti people a chance to see the thriving birdlife in a forest that is regularly pest controlled with 1080 through the Animal Health Board TB control programme to prevent possums spreading TB onto dairy farms.

The Pureora Forest – between Te Kuiti and Taupo - was saved from logging in the 1970s by the actions of Stephen King from the Hokianga. He and fellow protestors climbed and hid in ancient trees to prevent them from being felled. Today 80,000 hectares of this magnificent forest remains, teeming with birdlife.

The Guardians were granted a permit by DOC to catch up to 50 birds and transfer them to Moturua Island. In early June a team of kaimahi and rangatahi from Te Rawhiti went to Pureora to start locating and prefeeding toutouwai in our permitted catching areas. Tasty treats of meal worms (*Tenebrio molitor*) and wax moth larvae (*Galleria mellonella*) were on offer to any curious toutouwai that the boys met and continued to feed over several days. The site was flagged for the arrival of the catching teams.

Catching was due to start on June 16, so the full team assembled at Pureora the night before for a powhiri at Te Hape marae and a wonderful meal with the locals. We had earlier discovered that the boxes the toutouwai were to be transported in had been prepared using the wrong instructions, so the team came together to rectify the problem, working into the night. Kevin brought his trusty helpers Simon and Morag Fordham and Sharon Kast as well as a highly experienced crew from DOC – Steve McManus, Hazel Speed and Fiona Gordon. Local DOC staff were also on hand – Tertia and

Lucy. The Guardians contingent comprised Richard Robbins as project coordinator, Theresa Vujcich as cook extraordinaire and Fleur Corbett as all round helper. Blandy was the iwi liaison and Rana Rewha lead the team from Rawhiti on the ground. The guys – Rana, Alvin Rewha, Robert McPherson, Teina Hook, Fabian Rewha and Wiremu Hook - had already been on the road for two weeks, having done a kiwi survey in Coromandel and some doing kiwi handling skills at Ponui Island before coming to Pureora. Rumour has it they had been living on boil up for much of this time, so Theresa's cooking was a welcome change. But they put down a mean hangi on our last night at Pureora.

Catching day one emerged grey and drizzly – and not TOO cold for the Northlanders. Kevin briefed the large group on how things would run. Catching was to be done with clap traps and team leaders were assigned. The first day's catching at Pikiariki was slow, with mostly males caught. The birds were taken to a designated house where they were kept quiet and well fed with the aforementioned tasty treats.

On day two we ventured further to Select Loop in the Mangatutu area of the forest. It was wet and cold, but was a better catching day where the quota of 25 males was met, but we were still way down on female numbers.

The pressure was on for day three as we needed to get the female numbers up. If not enough females were caught it potentially jeopardised the whole project as it would be very unfair to put a few females on an island with a larger number of 'persistent' males. The team split up into several locations and some tried an alternative technique of mist netting. But the clap traps came through in the end, and we caught a total of 18 females which Kevin considered sufficient.

On the eve of day three we loaded 43 modified pet boxes (sponsored by Masterpet) into a very comfortable campervan (sponsored by Wilderness Motorhomes) and started on our journey north. The birds had to be kept cool, so the aircon was on cold the whole way. But it was a good trip and we arrived in Paihia at 1am – offloaded the birds and defrosted. After a nice breakfast of more tasty treats, the toutouwai then travelled to Homestead Bay on Moturua Island by private boat and then DOC barge where they were met by kaumatua and kuia from Te Rawhiti and around 60 local people (who were transported courtesy of Explore Group). DOC put on a fantastic sausage sizzle to celebrate the release.

It was with relief and joy that we saw the birds fly free from their boxes onto their new island home. We have been monitoring them since and they are dispersing well around the island, still sorting out territories and finding partners. But we look forward to seeing some sign of nesting around September and some island hatched birds after that.

Thanks to Richard Robbins for managing the project. To Kevin Parker for sharing his wonderful skills. To all the people who helped, right from the permit applicaiton to the release. And to sponsors and supporters; Air NZ Environment Trust, Explore Group, ASB Community Trust, Lotteries Environment and Heritage, Wilderness Motorhomes, Masterpet, Sargood Bequest, DOC, Terri Cottier, Dennis Corbett, New World Kerikeri, Churchills Kerikeri. What a wonderful team effort.

Fleur Corbett