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A secret weapon in finding whio

Tai has been successfully sniffing out whio in Taranaki. He is one of the first Conservation Dogs certified to locate whio in the region and has helped to locate a record number of 64 whio chicks on eight rivers this season.

The Department of Conservation's (DOC) biodiversity ranger Joe Carson is thrilled with his effort and says Tai is their secret weapon. "He will find these rare native blue ducks in tiny holes and point to them. It was amazing to find 64 whio chicks. He is making a real difference," she says.

Kiwibank and DOC joined forces in 2016 in a national partnership to support the Conservation Dogs programme. Tai lives with Joe and she says "it's like working with your best mate. You are on a beautiful river, watching him work and its just magic."

To further boost the programme, 10 juvenile whio will be released back into Taranaki rivers today as part of the Whio Forever partnership with Genesis. Up to seven of the birds will be released into brand new territory on the Patea and Te Popo streams which are now protected by the stoat trapping network extended as part of environmental project Taranaki Mouna.

The 10 ducks were bred at the Ngā Manu Nature reserve in Waikanae and the Hamilton Zoo. They have spent the last few weeks at DOC's Turangi whio creche to 'harden up' before being released into the wild.

In 1945 the local whio/blue duck population on Mt Taranaki was designated 'functionally extinct' because of predation by stoats and rats. A predator programme covering 7,500 ha was started in 2003. With a lot of hard work by DOC, the Central North Island Blue Duck Trust and Genesis Energy National Whio Forever programme, the whio population has now built up to 27 pairs. Within 10 years the Taranaki Mouna project plans to increase the number to 50 breeding pairs.

Taranaki Mouna has extended the safe area for whio and kiwi on Mt Taranaki by increasing the stoat trapping network to 10,600 ha last year. Further extensions are planned for 2018.

“Taranaki Mounga is proud to work alongside other groups with the aim of increasing the whio population on the mountain and with the record number of chicks found by the Conservation Dogs the future is looking great. Whio are extremely territorial and a pair need at least 1km of river to themselves so increasing the stoat trapping network gives them more safe area to live and breed,” says Taranaki Mounga Project Manager Sean Zieltjes.

The 10 whio chicks will be released into the Patea, Te Popo and Mangawhete streams.

ENDS

Note: Tai is a two-year-old male chocolate Labrador heading cross.

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About Taranaki Mounga

Taranaki Mounga is a collaboration between the Department of Conservation (DOC), eight Taranaki iwi and philanthropic investor NEXT Foundation, supported by founding sponsors Shell New Zealand, Jasmine Social Investments, TSB Community Trust and Landcare Research. The project will push the boundaries in landscape-scale ecological restoration over an area that includes the 34,000 ha of national park encompassing Taranaki, Pouakai, Kaitake and the protected Ngā Motu/Sugar Loaf Islands. Taranaki Mounga will restore and revitalise the environment so wildlife will once again flourish in this treasured place.

www.taranakimounga.nz