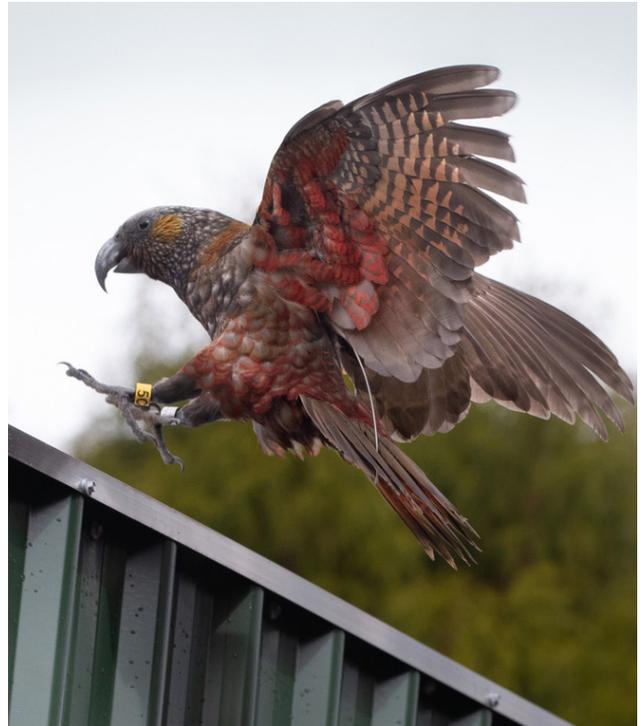


# RISING — to the — CHALLENGE

*Stories from the Covid-19 crisis*



*Left: Local Robbie Jameson from Wilsons Abel Tasman replenishing the kākā feeder – photo AJ Carrick.*

*Right: Kākā released at Bark Bay – photo Ruth Bollongino fernphotos.com*

## PROJECT JANSZOOM: SOME SILVER LININGS IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Imagine being in a time warp in the Abel Tasman National Park. Going back 40 years to when locals visited the park for a picnic and a swim without the crowds. Only footprints were left on the golden sandy beaches, the only sound was the birdsong, and the only important connection was with the beauty of the native forest.

Effectively, that is exactly what has happened in the Abel Tasman National Park as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, says Project Janszoon director Bruce Vander Lee.

“It’s a different place than it was prior to the pandemic,” he says. “There are less people, but visiting has become a magical nostalgic experience.

“With no overseas visitors there is lots of space, and with all the biodiversity gains Project Janszoon and our partners have made over the past eight years, the park is alive with native birds and stunning native bush that has not been experienced like this for decades.

“The tourist operators and concessionaries are our important partners and they are hurting, but we know New Zealanders will jump at the unexpected opportunity to be able to explore this gem in their backyard. We will welcome them and look forward to sharing our unique conservation story with them.”

Project Janszoon is an environmental initiative supported by NEXT, the Department of Conservation, local iwi, Abel Tasman Birdsong Trust, tourism operators and the community. Named after Abel Janszoon Tasman it is restoring and preserving the park for all to enjoy.

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Vander Lee says the Park was closed for overnight visits and boats during Level 3 and 4 of the Covid-19 lockdown, effectively shutting out volunteers and the Department of Conservation rangers whose main job is to maintain the trapping network to get rid of predators like rats, stoats and possums. One of Project Janszoon's biggest concerns was for the welfare of the 24 kākā which were released prior to Christmas. Being hand reared they still relied on some feeding stations, which could not be accessed in lockdown.

“As soon as we were able to get in the air in Level 3 we flew over the Park to monitor kākā numbers. We were able to track them through their transmitters, and we have lost one and another is unaccounted for. While this is disappointing, the rest of the population is thriving and that was a tremendous relief.

“On another positive side, it is important for the kākā's survival in the wild to break with human contact and the lockdown forced an acceleration in this. We have been able to detect that they have now spread more widely down the coastline. That means that a day visitor can encounter them now – you don't have to do a five-day tramp to see one.

“The kākā are one of the many highlights of the Abel Tasman. They are natural comedians, bold and loud. They were recently functionally extinct in the park as only wild males were left until Project Janszoon began reintroducing female kākā, and they are only able to survive now because of the extensive stoat trapping network covering over 20,000 hectares.”

Project Janszoon has enthusiastic buy-in by locals. As soon as restrictions were eased volunteers were kayaking significant distances to replenish the kākā feeders, in some cases a one-hour paddle from Torrent Bay to Bark Bay and return. And private landowners were assisting by checking and emptying traps on their boundaries.

“Project Janszoon is a fabulous story of collaboration – of what can happen when everyone works together,” Vander Lee says.

Sixteen year old Milan Chapman, who is one of the Abel Tasman's Youth Ambassadors, spent the first part of lockdown in his family's bach in the park in Torrent Bay. He's become accustomed to being awoken to the dawn chorus over the past few years, but says lockdown allowed an even stronger connection to nature.

“Everything was so quiet, so peaceful. The plants started growing back across the tracks and the birdlife was really noticeable. It was a really special experience. No tourists, no boats, just serenity.

“It felt like it was how Abel Tasman used to be, back in the day, and it was a real privilege to experience it in this state.”

NEXT environmental advisor Devon McLean says Project Janszoon has been a blueprint for other environmental projects throughout New Zealand and it is encouraging to see the progress being made.

“Working to restore the essence of how it used to be is fundamentally what Project Janszoon is all about.” he says.

“Setting the Park on a path that celebrates biodiversity, as we approach the 100th anniversary of its founding in 1942, is creating a special legacy that all involved can rightly feel proud of.

“If the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown has heightened the feeling of nostalgia and enthusiasm for restoration and what has been achieved then we will look back on this extraordinary time with a silver lining. “

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