

# RISING — to the — CHALLENGE

*Stories from the Covid-19 crisis*



*Almost buried – seasonal trail camera. Photo Nick Foster.*

## TE MANAHUNA AORAKI: COVID 19 LOCKDOWN LUCKY

A global pandemic like Covid-19 hitting New Zealand and locking down the entire country wasn't part of environmental project Te Manahuna Aoraki's risk management plan. But when it happened – effectively bringing to a halt the conservation work in the Upper McKenzie basin for over a month – the team reckon they got lockdown lucky.

"Timing is everything," says Te Manahuna Aoraki project director Fiona McNab.

"The lockdown restrictions at Level three and four meant few of our team were able to undertake their field work during those weeks," she says.

"But as luck would have it all of our trapping lines were fully operational, and we had just cleared them all of predators. That was just by chance, we consider ourselves really fortunate as it means the gains we are making to protect our native bird species weren't lost.

"Then when restrictions were lifted in level two, and all our team were allowed back in the field, it came just in time – before heavy snow would have hampered our research."

**“This is the best result DOC’s Kakī Recovery Programme has seen in more than forty years. It represents a huge amount of mahi by a number of organisations, and Te Manahuna Aoraki’s trapping networks that are now protecting about eighty per cent of the kakī range will have been contributing factor.”**

**Fiona McNab,  
Te Manahuna Aoraki  
project director**

At level two Te Manahuna Aoraki’s small mammal researcher Nick Foster and others in the team were able to get back into the mountains to bring in the motion activated cameras before they were lost to winter. The cameras were positioned in the mountains during summer as part of the research to determine the upper altitudinal limits of small mammal pest species like hedgehogs, stoats, weasels, ferrets, mice, rabbit and hares, in the project area.

“At level three Nick was also able to salvage research work involving a number of hedgehogs with transmitters attached to them out in the mountains. The transmitter enables him to track how far they travel but the batteries were reaching the end of their lives. Fortunately he could head back into the mountains to track them down before they were lost forever.”

Like many field staff Fiona says her team did struggle with the restrictions at times – they are used to physical work – not stuck at home waiting for daily updates on the number of active Covid-19 cases in New Zealand.

“Our team are passionate about the great outdoors – but they adapted, and some of us set up tents in our backyards during lockdown so we could spend a few nights under the stars.

“And day one of level two when the restrictions were eased, it was like a race to get out the door – they couldn’t wait to get back to work in the field.”

Te Manahuna Aoraki is a large scale conservation project, nearly two years into a three year feasibility phase. It focuses on restoring the natural landscapes and native species across 310,000 hectares of the upper Mackenzie Basin and Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park. The iconic area is home to many endangered species like the kea/tuke, rock wren, ngutuparore/wrybill, robust grasshoppers, and the world’s rarest wading bird the kakī/black stilt.

Founding partners are the Department of Conservation, NEXT Foundation, Te Rūnanga o Arowhenua, Te Rūnanga o Waihao and Te Rūnanga o Moeraki. They are joined by high country land owners and investors Predator Free 2050 Ltd, Aotearoa Foundation, Jasmine Social Investments and Global Wildlife Conservation.

One of the major problems in this area is the abundance of feral cats, Fiona says. Lockdown provided an opportunity for conservation dogs to have intensive training specialising in detecting feral cats which are the apex predator in this ecosystem.

“Feral cats prey indiscriminately on all species, have a large home range, are trap shy and difficult to control. Despite ongoing efforts there are still many feral cats in the wild presently.

“We are hoping these trained feral cat detection dogs, coupled with lures and bait dumps will significantly reduce the numbers and give our endangered species a greater chance of survival.”

The other positive news to come during lockdown was that the adult kakī numbers in the wild have increased by more than 30 per cent over the past year – bringing the total count to 169.

“We are all ecstatic about these numbers,” Fiona says. “This is the best result DOC’s Kakī Recovery Programme has seen in more than forty years. It represents a huge amount of mahi by a number of organisations, and Te Manahuna Aoraki’s trapping networks that are now protecting about eighty per cent of the kakī range will have been contributing factor.

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Devon McLean  
NEXT environmental advisor

“Local farmers within the Te Manahuna Aoraki project have contributed to the increased kakī population, allowing predator control on their properties and by helping DOC staff collect kakī eggs from farmed areas. Kakī eggs are uplifted and taken to the brooder built by our partners, Global Wildlife Conservation, so they have a better chance of survival.”

NEXT environmental advisor Devon McLean says the success of Te Manahuna Aoraki feasibility project is the collective work of many parties.

“We are learning a great deal about the behaviour of both pests and their prey which will help the project team form a plan to move forward.

“We want to transform the prospects of this most special region of Aotearoa New Zealand, and secure the future of the unique species that inhabit it.”



Conservation dogs in training – Julius, Slick, Sonny Bill William, April 2020. Photo Adriana Theobald.

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