

# Kākābeak making a comeback

Conservationists have boosted by a third the number of endangered kākābeak plants known to exist in the wild. Staff at the Forest Liferforce Restoration (FLR) Trust have dug 35 of the plants with the spectacular curved, crimson flowers into bluffs in Te Urewera National Park, overlooking the Maungataniwha Native Forest in inland Hawke's Bay.

Until recently just 110 kākābeak (*Clianthis maximus* or ngutukākā) were known to exist in the wild. Five of those are on the Waiiau Bluffs, where they have been joined by the 35 transplants.



Work is under way to stop wild kākābeak plants heading towards extinction.

Wild-grown kākābeak have been decimated by goats, deer and other exotic browsers to the extent that the species now holds New Zealand's highest possible threatened plant ranking of nationally critical. They are grown widely in gardens but these domestic plants are all derivatives of a few wild plants. They have been interbred and have little or no genetic value.

Hawke's Bay-based FLR Trust runs the largest kākābeak propagation and restoration programme in New Zealand and has five seed nurseries, four in Hawke's Bay and one in the Bay of Islands. These have produced hundreds of juvenile kākābeak plants, which staff have started planting on conservation land.

Trust staff are perfecting a ground-breaking technique to propagate the plants by blasting seeds from a shotgun into likely nursery sites. These are frequently on bluffs or cliff faces and are as inaccessible to humans as they are to browsers. Helicopters are often the only way to reach them.

Staffer Barry Crene developed the technique using re-loaded shotgun shells packed with regular shotgun pellets, a pulp medium and kākābeak seed. It creates the potential for an aerial propagation effort on a scale that hasn't yet been possible.

The kākābeak once ranged widely across the North Island. Its distribution is believed to have been expanded by Māori, who valued it for its decorative appeal.

■ Peter Heath