



Forest refugees come 'home' to Cape

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HE WAS a typical Kiwi bush-dweller. No nonsense, a bit rough around the edges, unused to attention and certainly not fond of the limelight. His defiant, bright-eyed stare spoke of a hard life lived well.

It told of constant work and unrelenting routine. A life where every day's effort was about surviving the next. Yet it also reflected the freedoms of this nation's back-country. When they clipped the metal band around his skinny leg he cocked his head and fixed them with that stare. And chirped.

He was a 30g adult North Island robin and he'd just been caught in a clap-trap in inland Hawke's Bay, in a pine forest owned by the Forest Liferforce Restoration Trust — a group dedicated to the survival of threatened species of fauna and flora, and to restoring the ngahere mauri (forest liferforce) in native forests within the Central North Island.

In one of the largest forest conversion exercises attempted in New Zealand, the 4000ha Maungataniwha Pine Forest, three hours drive inland from Napier along precipitous gravel roads, is being logged in stages. As large sections are cleared, native bush is being encouraged to regenerate on the freshly-exposed hillsides.

With the pine is going the relatively new habitat of several species of native birds including North Island robins, tomtits and whitehead.

By happy chance the first of the Maungataniwha clearances were taking place at exactly the same time as conservationists at the Cape Sanctuary, on the coast south east of Napier, were deciding to restock their 2500ha mixed habitat reserve — protected by a 10km predator-proof fence. Robins, tomtits and whitehead were on their shopping list.

"These birds used to live all over New Zealand but, outside the ranges, their numbers have declined dramatically," said Tamsin Ward-Smith, manager at the Cape Sanctuary. "We wanted to bring them back to the Cape and Maungataniwha was an ideal source. So we got the FLR Trust's go-ahead to set up a catching and translocation operation there."

Hawke's Bay helicopter pilot Kevin Campbell was flying for one of the sanctuary's owners at the time and was roped into the project, along with FLR Trust and Cape Sanctuary staff and about a dozen volunteers from the region. Together they spent many weekends out in the "wop-wops" setting clap-traps and mist nets, and ensnaring the canny birds with recorded bird-song and tasty

treats.

"My abiding memory was that it was bloody cold," Campbell chuckles. "We were out there in May and June and it was mightily uncomfortable. But there was a great spirit of adventure and camaraderie among the team that was boosted by the knowledge we were doing something worthwhile."

Since the initial capturing operation in May 2007, supplementary translocations have taken place to ensure a good span of genetic representation within the population now establishing itself in the sanctuary.

Before each operation Ward-Smith spends days up at Maungataniwha by herself: observing, listening for and recording calls; locating pairs and training them to come down to the sound of a vehicle; and enticing them to feed in one particular spot by "baiting" it with mealworms.

The catching teams then arrive at these pre-determined spots and set things up in the pitch dark.

Collection isn't easy. During the initial eight-day catching operation just 16 whitehead were caught. A further 44 robins and 28 tomtits were taken in five subsequent follow-up operations spanning two years.





Clap-traps are like giant mouse-traps. Spring-loaded frames, covered by netting, that come together rapidly when triggered.

They usually catch male birds who “are a little bit silly and operate on their stomachs”, according to Ward-Smith.

Arguably mist nets are even more difficult to use but they’re useful for the more elusive females.

A very fine-mesh net, almost invisible from a few metres away, is strung between a pair of four-metre aluminium poles and positioned across a gap between trees, in a clearing or along a track that is likely to be visited by the target bird species.

Once captured, the birds are popped into individual black drawstring purses to help calm them down and prevent injury. They’re taken to a central collection point where Ward-Smith, affectionately dubbed “The Little General” by her team,

oversees a registration operation where the birds are measured, sexed, tagged, recorded and checked for disease.

They’re then placed into cardboard boxes, a bit like cat boxes, in which they’re transported to the Cape Sanctuary. The team has got the process down to a fine art and survival rates among the captured birds are stellar.

“The weirdest part of it all,” Ward-Smith says, “is that despite the time we’ve taken and the effort we’ve gone to releasing them ‘back’ into their ‘native’ environment, the little guys invariably relocate themselves into our exotic pine plantations. They spend a lot of time in and around the native bush, but they tend to nest and breed in the habitat they’ve become used to up at Maungataniwha.”

Regardless of the birds’ lifestyle preferences, both the FLR Trust and the Cape Sanctuary are

delighted simply to have the little birds back where they belong — no longer refugees in their own land.

“In this country we tend to get really excited about our so-called emblematic species such as the kiwi, the giant weta and the kakapo,” said Simon Hall, the FLR Trust’s chairman.

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WELCOME HOME: Cape Sanctuary volunteers and staff releasing Maungataniwha birds into their species’ original coastal habitat



GOTCHA:
Cape Sanctuary manager Tamsin Ward-Smith processing a whitehead collected from the Forest Lifeforce Restoration Trust's Maungataniwha Pine Forest.



FINE LINES:
Cape Sanctuary manager Tamsin Ward-Smith and volunteer Keith Coombe erecting a mist net for catching tomtit and robin in the Forest Lifeforce Restoration Trust's Maungataniwha Pine Forest.



MARKED: A North Island robin from the Forest Lifeforce Restoration Trust's Maungataniwha Pine Forest, newly equipped with distinguishing leg bands.



MASTER OF FOREST: A robin from the Forest Lifeforce Restoration Trust's Maungataniwha Pine Forest in his new habitat at the Cape Sanctuary. PHOTOS/SUPPLIED