



Rare plants struggle to make comeback

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A BURST of crimson gave the game away. There, clinging to the cliffs towering above the rushing waters of the Mohaka River deep in the rugged wilderness of inland Hawke's Bay, was what they'd trekked all day to find.

For hours the hunting party had scanned the sheer walls of the gorge with a high-powered spotting scope, scrutinising the inaccessible terrain for signs of the life they were so keen to find.

"There — just above that overhang," Pete Shaw said, a smile of satisfaction spreading slowly across his face. "Not sure how anyone would get there."

The Forest Liferforce Restoration Trust forest manager had spotted the deep red flowers of one of New Zealand's rarest wild shrubs, the kakabeak, a member of the pea family also known by its botanical name of *Clianthus maximus* or as *ngutukaka* in te reo.

In spring it produces large, bright red flowers, which are curved like the beak of the parrot after which they're named, and hang in heavy bunches. It has green pods which turn brown and crack open to disperse many small black seeds.

In years gone by hundreds of plants grouped together would create a stunning spectacle. But today only a few lonely specimens remain in the wild, clinging to the inhospitable cliffs in a desperate defence against goats, deer and other exotic browsers.

Although grown widely in gardens these domestic plants are all derivatives from one wild plant. They have been interbred and have little or no genetic value.

The result is that this magnificent plant holds the highest possible threatened plant ranking: Nationally Critical.

So severely have imported fauna impacted on the kakabeak that, until recently, there were

only 109 specimens known to be growing in the wild across the whole of New Zealand. Four of these are on the Waiiau Bluffs in the Te Urewera National Park, adjacent to land owned by the Forest Liferforce Restoration Trust.

The trust was established by businessman Simon Hall and is funded indirectly by his company, food manufacturer Tasti Products. It exists to help restore threatened species of fauna and flora, and *ngahere mauri* (forest liferforce) to native forests.

It was the discovery of kakabeak on the Waiiau Bluffs that led to the Trust establishing, with the support and expertise of the Department of Conservation (DoC), a kakabeak restoration project. This is led by trustee and forest manager Pete Shaw, a former DoC employee.

In 1983 botanist Willie Shaw, Pete's brother, had been contracted by the Department of Lands and Survey to survey and assess the Maungataniwha Native Forest. He became interested in the dramatic cliff faces on the opposite bank of the Waiiau River, within Te Urewera National Park.

Here he found a single kakabeak plant, at that time the only confirmed record of that species in that part of the park.

Twenty-five years later, in October 2008, the Shaw brothers returned to the Waiiau Cliffs to search for it. They found it, along with a second specimen six metres away. A follow-up search conducted by Mr Shaw the following month yielded a further two plants on the cliffs.

Encouraged by this success the trust liaised with DoC regarding the best way to implement a restoration project and applied for a permit to collect seed as part of its drive to bring the kakabeak back from the brink of extinction in the wild. The Te Urewera plants were used as a source population and the project started to generate some momentum.

"It was a project that fitted perfectly with our ambition to help restore the vital energy of our native forests, most of which have had the soul ripped out of them through years of mismanagement and commercial exploitation," Mr Hall said.

The trust built a protected kakabeak propagation enclosure at Waiiau Camp in the Maungataniwha Native Forest and seed collection and propagation began. In the winter of 2010 came a landmark moment when the first kakabeak grown from Te Urewera seed were planted at Maungataniwha. So far only two of these plants have themselves provided seeds, with just one proving particularly productive.

As a result, the trust continues to search for additional plants from which seeds and cuttings can be taken to support the Maungataniwha propagation.

The expedition to Mohaka Gorge was part of this process and yielded exciting results. The search party comprising Pete Shaw and two plant and biodiversity experts recorded the locations of four kakabeak that day, all made conspicuous by their pendulous groupings of bright red flowers.

Some weeks later the trust returned to the gorge in an airforce Iroquois and winched a DoC ranger down to take cuttings. That evening Pete Shaw took them to Plant Hawke's Bay, Marie Taylor's nursery in Napier, for propagation.

"We eventually got 99 plants from those cuttings," Mr Hall said. "The exercise was a classic example of how many different organisations are working together to help ensure the survival of some of our most endangered forest plants."

Meanwhile, at Maungataniwha, the ground-breaking approach to kakabeak conservation continues. It's a mix of grounded Kiwi





thinking and innovation. This winter, for example, the trust is trialling the use of specially adapted shotgun shells to see if the precious seed will survive being propagated this way.

“We want to see if we can use this process to reintroduce this plant in areas like bluff systems where there is a reduced risk of predation,” Mr Hall said.

The image of these pioneering conservationists hovering above our forests, blasting the seeds of rare and beautiful NZ plants back into the wilderness they originally came from, is a powerful one. But, given their passion and persistence, it’s probably not one we should bet against.

“The exercise was

a classic example of how many different organisations are working together to help ensure the survival of some of our most endangered forest plants.”

Simon Hall, businessman



FUTURE HOPE: Pete Shaw’s daughter Jemma (left) and Simon Hall’s children George and Sabrina with one of the Maungataniwha kakabeak propagated from Te Urewera seed.

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GLORIOUS: A flowering kakabeak in the Maungataniwha Native Forest



PROTECTIVE: Forest Lifeforce Restoration Trust forest manager Pete Shaw surveys a newly built kakabeak propagation enclosure at Waiau Camp in the Maungataniwha Native Forest.