

Provided for client's internal research purposes only. May not be further copied, distributed, sold or published in any form without the prior consent of the copyright owner.



# 'Stunning battler' has come home

One of New Zealand's most endangered native plants, described by Forest Life Force Restoration Trust forest manager Peter Shaw as a stunning battler, is taking root in the Far North once again.

Forty kakabeak plants raised by the trust, a private conservation organisation, were planted on Robertson Island (Motuarohia) in the Bay of Islands on Saturday, and will be used to establish a seed nursery to produce more for planting in the wild.

The kakabeak (ngutukākā) holds New Zealand's highest possible threatened plant ranking: "nationally critical", despite its popularity as a garden plant.

Domestic plants are all derivatives from a few wild specimens, and have been interbred to the point where they have little if any genetic value.

The Hawke's Bay-based FLR Trust runs the largest kakabeak propagation and restoration programme in the country, and already has four seed nurseries established with seed taken from a species (*Clianthus maximus*) growing wild in the forests of the eastern North Island.

This species once occurred as far north as Great Barrier Island, but is now restricted to the East Coast region and occurs as far south as Maungaharuru Range in Hawke's Bay.

Until last year only 110 of those plants were known to exist in the wild, but the trust's nurseries have now produced hundreds more, which staff have

begun planting on conservation land across the region.

A more northerly species, *Clianthus puniceus*, is even rarer. Only one wild plant of this variety is known to exist in Northland, where it once thrived.

"The Bay of Islands nursery we've established on Robertson Island speaks to our determination to help re-establish the kakabeak across the whole of its natural range," trust chairman Simon Hall said.

"This is a great example of the role that private conservation initiatives must play in complementing the sterling work DOC does. Conservation in New Zealand can no longer be purely the preserve of government agencies. The job's too big, the battle's too fierce. Land owners and the private sector all have a role to play."

The nursery has been established on land owned by businessman Andrew Kelly, who has planted hundreds of berry-bearing native trees on Robertson Island in a bid to attract tui and other birds that used to live there.

The island was selected for the trust's most northerly seed nursery because it's been pest-free since 2009. It's one of a group of islands being restored by Project Island Song, a partnership between the volunteer group Guardians of the Bay of Islands, Rawhiti hapu Patukeha and Ngati Kuta, and the Department of Conservation.

"It's a long-term exercise, but today is an important next step in bringing this stunning battler back from the verge of extinc-

tion and helping to re-introduce it to parts of New Zealand where it once flourished," he said.

The kakabeak, with its spectacular bunches of crimson flowers curved like the beak of the parrot that gives it its name, once ranged widely across the North Island.

Its distribution is believed to have been expanded by Maori, who valued it for its decorative appeal.

Once hundreds of plants grouped together would create a stunning forest spectacle, but today only a few lonely specimens remain in the wild, clinging to inhospitable cliffs, their only defence against goats, deer and other exotic browsers.

Trust staff are also in the process of perfecting a groundbreaking technique to propagate the plants by blasting seeds from a shotgun into likely nursery sites, many of them patches of topsoil on bluffs or cliff faces that are as inaccessible to humans as they are to browsers.

Helicopters are often the only way to reach them.

Barry Crene developed the technique using re-loaded shotgun shells packed with regular shotgun pellets, a pulp medium and kakabeak seed.

The shells were then discharged into soil from a range of 20 metres, about the distance a helicopter might have to hover from likely nursery sites in the wild.

This creates the potential for an aerial propagation effort on a scale that hasn't yet been possible.



Provided for client's internal research purposes only. May not be further copied, distributed, sold or published in any form without the prior consent of the copyright owner



**DIGGING IN:** Forest Lifeforce Restoration Trust chairman Simon Hall with one of the kakabeak plants that were propagated at one of the trust's Maungataniwha native forest seed orchards. **PICTURE / SUPPLIED**



**GUARDIANS:** DOC biodiversity programme manager (Bay of Islands) Adrian Walker and Rod Brown, from the voluntary group Guardians of the Bay of Islands, planting one of the kakabeaks on Roberton Island. **PICTURE / SUPPLIED**