

# ATTEMPTS TO RE-ESTABLISH WEKAS, BROWN KIWIS AND RED-CROWNED PARAKEETS IN THE WAITAKERE RANGES

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## ABSTRACT

Attempts to re-establish Wekas, Brown Kiwis and Red-crowned Parakeets in the Waitakere Ranges were made between 1976 and 1986. None appears to have been successful, although Wekas did breed at Huia for several seasons.

## INTRODUCTION

Between 1976 and 1986 various attempts were made by the Auckland Regional Authority (now Council), the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society and private individuals to re-establish the North Island Weka (*Gallirallus australis greyi*), North Island Brown Kiwi (*Apteryx australis mantelli*) and Red-crowned Parakeet (*Cyanoramphus novaezelandiae*) in the Waitakere Ranges near Auckland. This paper records the history and outcome of these attempts. All map references refer to NZMS 260, and Figure 1 shows the place names mentioned in the text.

Apart from some details of the kiwi releases by the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society (J. Staniland, pers. comm. 1986) and the initial parakeet liberations at Huia by the Zoology Department of the University of Auckland (M. Dawe 1979), little seems to have been written about these releases. Most of the information presented here has been gathered orally from Auckland Regional Authority (ARA) staff, members of the Ornithological Society of New Zealand (OSNZ) and members of the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society (F&B).

### North Island Weka

Weka numbers in New Zealand as a whole declined late last century, probably because of habitat destruction and the introduction of mammalian predators and possibly because of disease (Robertson & Beauchamp 1985). However, they remained abundant over many areas of the North Island until 1915–1925, after which they became extinct in most districts (Robertson & Beauchamp 1985). Their preferred habitat is bush edges and scrub (Falla *et al.* 1979).

The pioneer Turner family of Huia, on the southern edge of the Waitakere Ranges, noted in the early 1900s that Wekas were around their property, as were Kakas (*Nestor meridionalis*) and nesting Grey-faced Petrels (*Pterodroma macroptera*). They stated that “although there were not many of the European rats [*Rattus rattus* and *R. norvegicus*] in Huia, there were plenty of the little furry native rats which are called ‘kiore’ [*R. exulans*] (Kirk & Turner 1966). Recent research implicates the ship rat in the decline of native birds (Atkinson 1973).

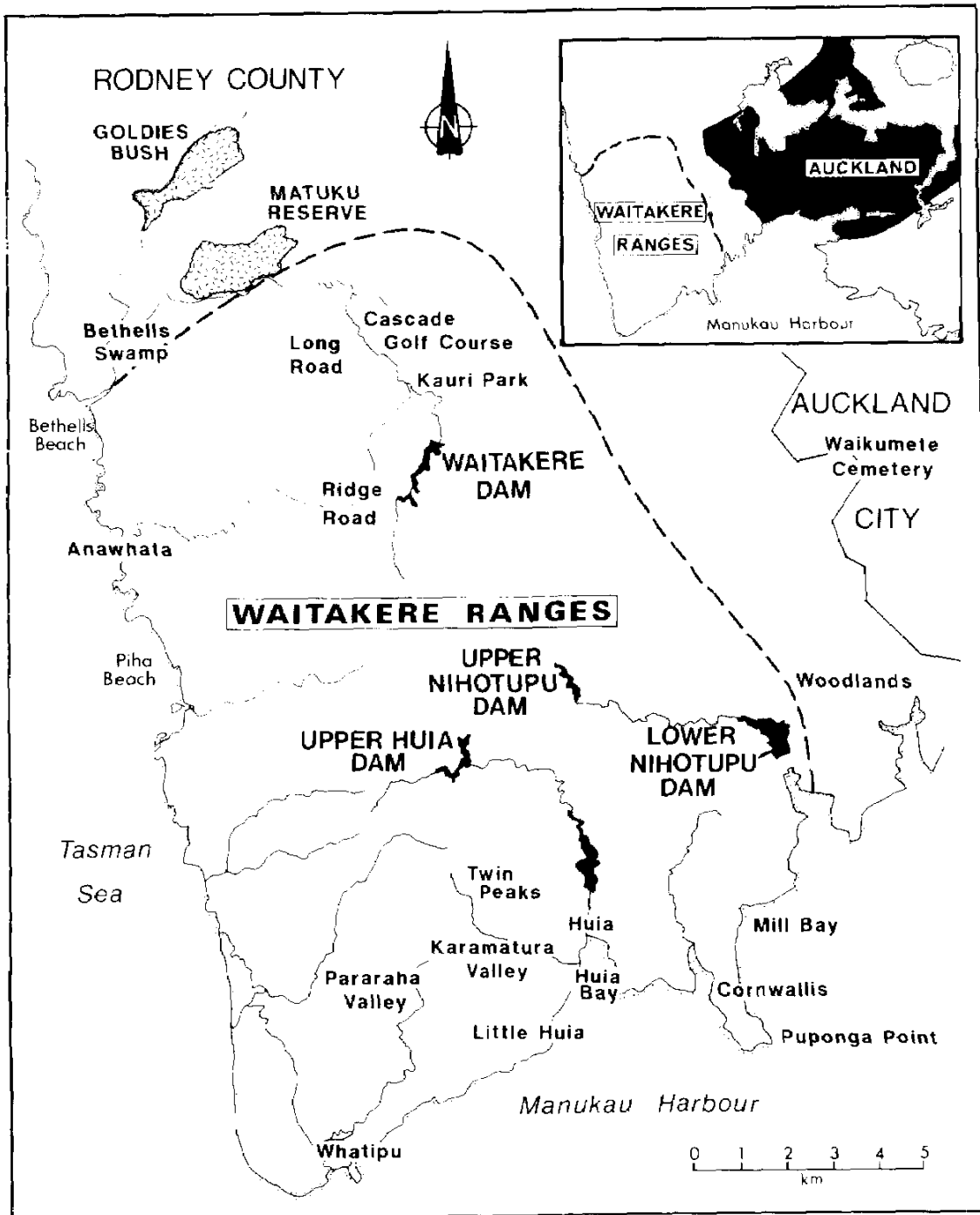


FIGURE 1 — Waitakere Ranges

The only current natural North Island Weka population is in the Gisborne district. A widely accepted view is that some avian disease might have caused the decline of Wekas throughout the North Island to what is now an insular distribution (Robertson & Beauchamp 1985). Attempts have been made to re-establish the species in some of its previous localities, for example, in the 1960s in the vicinity of the Bethells swamp at the northern end of the Waitakere Ranges (J. Staniland, pers. comm.), but most have been unsuccessful.

The most successful releases in recent years were made by the Wildlife Service on Kawau Island and by Dr David Robertson on Cape Brett Peninsula in the Bay of Islands (see Robertson 1976 and Beauchamp 1988).

TABLE 1 — Summary of Weka releases in the Waitakere Ranges. All birds were released at Huia Bay.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Source</i>	<i>Total No.</i>	<i>Adult male</i>	<i>Adult female</i>	<i>Juv. male</i>	<i>Juv. female</i>
Dec 1976	Gisborne	32	15	17	-	-
Dec 1976	Gisborne	8	?	?	-	-
Apr 1980	Gisborne	24	-	-	-	-
Jul 1980	Kawau Island (ex Gisborne)	4	?	?	?	?
Nov 1980	Wellington (ex Gisborne)	5	?	?	?	?
Apr 1981	Gisborne	36	15	16	2	3
Oct 1981	Gisborne	11	-	11	-	-
May 1982	Gisborne	19	8	11	-	-

Eight consignments, of 139 banded birds altogether, were released at Huia Bay (Q11 490640) in the Waitakere Ranges between 1976 and 1986. One consignment (4 birds) came from Kawau Island (introduced there from Gisborne) in July 1980, one consignment (5 birds) from Wellington (also originally from Gisborne) in November 1980, and six consignments (130 birds) from Gisborne (Table 1). The birds were held in four holding pens before being released.

About half the birds stayed near Huia Bay, and several pairs are known to have bred there. One pair nested in the garden of one of the rangers for three years and is thought to have raised four broods in the first season. Some were thought to have bred at Puponga Point in the Cornwallis area, where there is extensive scrub under poor-quality pines. Some 20-30 birds settled near the Huia lookout. The last sighting in this area, of a juvenile being pursued by a stoat, was in early 1985 (J. Walsh, pers. comm.).

Some of the birds dispersed more widely (see Figure 1):

1. One was caught in Waikumete Cemetery (R11 567765), 15 km northeast in Glen Eden, and subsequently released back at Huia.

2. Many were heard and seen at Mill Bay (R11 533662) in the Nihotupu catchment, 4-8 km northeast of the release site, still in the southern Waitakeres.
3. A few were seen and heard in the Anawhata catchment, 4-8 km north into the ranges (J. Walsh, pers. comm.).
4. One was found on the southern side of the Manukau Harbour.
5. One was seen at the start of Long Road in 1979, 18 km north of the Huia release site (G. Wittmer, pers. comm.).
6. Two were seen on Cascade golf course, 15 km north of the Huia release site, at about the same time as the Long Road sighting (G. Wittmer, pers. comm.).
7. One was seen on the road below the upper Huia dam in 1984 (R. Sleeman, pers. comm.).
8. One was seen on Ridge Road in the Waitakere dam catchment (W. Beveridge, pers. comm.).
9. Four or five were seen crossing the road below Huia Point in early 1986 (G. Toliday, pers. comm.).
10. The most recent record was on 29 September 1986, when three birds were heard at the back of Huia farm in a pole kauri stand that was grazed underneath, adjacent to scrub (S. King, pers. comm.).

In the opinion of several Park rangers, the releases might have been more successful if they had been made in the water supply catchment of Pararaha Valley, away from dogs belonging to residents and day-trippers. Dogs and stoats probably prevented Wekas becoming established locally at Huia. Ferrets (*Putorius putorius*) and feral cats (*Felis catus*), also likely predators of Wekas, are at Whatipu (G. Toliday, pers. comm.).

There has been some discussion about the wisdom of continuing to release Wekas because they eat native snails and frogs (*Leiopelma hochstetteri*). However, Wekas were part of the original avifauna of the Waitakere Ranges, and pigs and cats probably do more damage to snails and frogs than Wekas do. Wekas are not totally harmful, being known to eat mice, rats, and occasionally even stoats (Morrison 1980; Watson, in prep.).

*Conclusion:* The release of Wekas in the Waitakere Ranges has apparently failed.

### **North Island Brown Kiwi**

Brown Kiwis were once widespread in the North Island but now are locally numerous only in forested areas north of the Manawatu Gorge. They live in all forest types and are common in manuka/kanuka scrub. They have colonised some North Auckland exotic pine forests (Reid 1985) and have been introduced successfully to Little Barrier, Ponui and Kapiti Islands.

*Releases:* Three were released by the Auckland Regional Authority at Huia Bay in the early 1980s. Soon afterwards one was found sick and later found dead at Huia. The last record was in late 1984, when probe marks were found in the Twin Peaks area (Q11 480610) (W. Beveridge, Chief Ranger, pers. comm.).

Of 41 birds rescued by F&B from Northland farm, 39 were released in Matuku Reserve (Q11 420810) in the northern Waitakere Ranges and outside the regional park. They were released in small batches, followed

by two birds released singly. All birds were banded. The first release was on 21 December 1980, and more were released in 1981 (J. Staniland, pers. comm.). The birds were heard near the release point for 2-3 years.

One kiwi was recovered dead a few kilometres away, east of Goldies Bush (Q11 410830). There were unconfirmed reports of probings in a pine plantation southeast of Matuku Reserve, and also reports to ARA Rangers of birds being heard from time to time in the Waitakere Ranges. These reports are unconfirmed, however, and have to be treated cautiously.

*Conclusion:* The release of kiwis in the Waitakere Ranges has apparently failed. To confirm this conclusion, taped calls should be played at night in all major catchments.

### **Red-crowned Parakeet**

Of the two species of parakeet on the mainland, the Yellow-crowned Parakeet (*C. auriceps*) is the commoner over much of the country, except in the Auckland and Northland districts (P. Anderson, pers. comm.), and the Red-crowned Parakeet is now in a few large forest tracts on the mainland and on many offshore islands (Falla *et al.* 1979). Both species were formerly in all mainland forest tracts, but their numbers have decreased greatly. Last century both species were so common that they were regarded as pests of crops in the 1870s and 1880s. Their decline is thought to have been caused by introduced predators (Taylor 1985). Fortunately, both species breed well in captivity, and aviary-bred birds have been released on Tiritiri and Cuvier Islands, in the Wairarapa, and in the Waitakere Ranges (Taylor 1985).

*Releases:* Before the first liberation by Mark Dawe of the Zoology Department, University of Auckland, five aviaries were erected in the Karamatura Valley, Huia (Q11 490650). Fourteen birds from Wellington Zoo were transferred there on 4 May 1977, as well as two birds from the Zoology Department aviary of Auckland University and one retained from the Tiritiri Island liberation of 2 September 1976.

On 11 May 1977, seven birds were released from two of the aviaries after being held for one week. Another eight were released from two more aviaries on 12 May. A single pair was left in one aviary to act as call birds. The liberated birds continued to return to food supplied in the aviaries after the last two were released on 14 May 1977. After this date there were several spells of stormy weather which might have caused losses among the newly released birds (Dawe 1979). The last bird was seen on 8 June 1977.

A second transfer of 10 birds from Wellington to Auckland University took place on 29 June 1977. These birds, as well as six males from Trounson Kauri Park, were transferred to Huia in October 1977. Two birds died within four days of release. Twelve more were then liberated, leaving one pair in captivity for breeding.

The work started by Dawe was carried on by a local resident, Mr M. Middleton, with Auckland University and the Acclimatisation Society giving logistic support. It is not known how many birds were released. Although one bird was seen flying over Woodlands (R11 555714) and one flying up from the shore at Little Huia (Q11 490640, G. Toliday, pers. comm.), the parakeets have apparently died out.

Middleton died in 1980, leaving no records, and it was 5-6 years later that Barry Green (Senior Ranger, ARA) took over the re-introduction scheme. He used an extension of Auckland Zoo's permit to breed and release parakeets. To date, Green has released 17 birds, at first letting them forage out and return to the aviary for additional food, as Middleton did. He has found two killed by cats and suspects that they are too slow on the ground to escape from predators. He noted that the parakeets tended to stay in the immediate vicinity of the release site for a few weeks before dispersing. His most recent sighting was of two in mid-December 1986. Greg Wittmer, the ranger at Kauri Park (Q11 462792), saw several birds between 1977 and 1986. The birds appeared to be cage releases in that their behaviour was unsettled. They appeared not to feed much, and seemed to be just passing through. An interesting record is the sighting of two in 1984-85 in 16 ha of kauri and mixed coastal bush (R10 615995) at the North Shore Pony Club (Mrs F. Brodnax, pers. comm.) 37 km away. These may have been some of the newly released Waitakere birds dispersing northward.

*Conclusion:* The Red-crowned Parakeet liberations have apparently failed.

#### DISCUSSION

Attempts to re-establish Wekas, Brown Kiwis and Red-crowned Parakeets in the Waitakere Ranges have apparently failed. The Matuku Reserve was probably too small for a self-sustaining population of kiwis; those that left the reserve probably scattered widely and were vulnerable to predators as they moved over open farmland and fragmented bush country; the three kiwis of unknown sex released at Huia were too few to become established. Residents' dogs and other predators near the release site at Huia probably killed most of the Wekas, and others scattered very widely. Cats and other ground predators near habitation at Huia probably took many of the Red-crowned Parakeets, and the many small releases were probably less effective than several large releases would have been.

Despite these failures, I believe that all three species could be re-established in the Waitakere Ranges if future liberations are planned carefully. Release sites should be well away from human habitation and domestic dogs and cats. The upper Huia dam (Q11 474697), the upper Nihotupu dam (Q11 497711) or the Waitakere dam (Q11 466770) may be suitable release sites because they are in the heart of the Waitakeres and are surrounded by suitable habitat. Each release should be of 25-50 birds, which should be held in aviaries at the release site for several weeks before release. Food should be provided at predator-proof feeding stations for several months after release. All birds should be banded before release so that sightings of unbanded birds will indicate successful breeding. Some birds should be fitted with miniature radiotransmitters so that their movements, behaviour and fate can be investigated after release.

The ARA, with assistance from the Department of Conservation, is planning a release of Yellow-crowned Parakeets at the upper Huia dam where the most mature, unlogged forest of the ranges is found. In this programme, approximately 50 one-year-old aviary-reared birds are to be released in each of three seasons (T. Stein, pers. comm.). This release programme is more

likely to succeed than the earlier rather haphazard releases of Red-crowned Parakeets, not because Yellow-crowned Parakeets are more suited to the Waitakeres but because of better release methods.

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