

# Behind the fence

**Julia Panfylova** visits Rotokare Scenic Reserve, in Taranaki, a thriving biodiversity hotspot owned and run by the local community.

The first successful predator-proof fence was established around Wellington's Karori Wildlife Sanctuary (now Zealandia) in 1999. Its success led to the development of many similar projects in New Zealand.

Interestingly, the areas that were chosen to fence have not generally been places of high existing biodiversity but areas with a very motivated local community that wished to restore and protect native pockets of bush. One such example is Rotokare Scenic Reserve.

Rotokare is a stunning 230ha forested hill country catchment with extensive wetlands, a 17.8ha natural lake, and two walkways. In 2007, it was surrounded by 8.2km predator-proof fence that has successfully kept the introduced mammalian predators at a zero density level. It is a community-owned and community-driven reserve, with great conservation potential.

Projects like Rotokare not only restore the ecosystem but also provide the community with an opportunity to explore the unique and diverse range of native and endemic flora and fauna. Everyone is welcome at the Rotokare Reserve and the entrance is free, but donations are appreciated.

In October, the Manawatu branch of Forest & Bird travelled to south Taranaki to explore what is hidden behind the fence of Te Rotokare. We learned that, after the fence was erected, the ancient bush started to recover

from possums browsing. Now the forest is a home to many unique birds, lizards, fish, and insects.

The story of each species is unique. For example, tieke/saddlebacks were reintroduced to the reserve in 2014. Half the initial 60 birds were sourced from Little Barrier Island, and another half were taken from Bushy Park, Forest & Bird's fenced conservation area near Whanganui. The population has been very successful since the translocation, and we could hear their noisy laughing sounds everywhere.

In contrast to tieke, North Island robins came back to the reserve themselves in 2010. The population has remained small, but monitoring showed that four out of five known pairs were raising chicks. There is a plan to translocate more robins, possibly from Bushy Park, to increase the genetic diversity of the Rotokare population. We were also very happy to find out that Rotokare is aiming to be the next home for stitchbird/hihi! They were due to be introduced in March this year.

Rotokare is not only about birds. For example, we saw banded kōkopu in one of the forest streams. The kōkopu reproduce in the Rotokare Lake (usually the species will go to the sea), but introduced perch are probably threatening the kōkopu by eating their young before they can make it back safely to the stream. The Rotokare Scenic Reserve Trust hopes to develop perch control plans in the near



future, which may improve survival of the banded kōkopu.

In Rotokare, there is an exciting opportunity to witness the nightlife of the bush. If you are lucky, you can encounter a kiwi on a guided night walk. Thirty kiwi have been released into Rotokare as part of the Taranaki Kohanga Kiwi at Rotokare, a joint project with Taranaki Kiwi Trust. Two of them were fitted with transmitters, and recently some of the birds were micro-chipped to help with monitoring. We were unlucky with kiwi this time, but we watched a couple of dishevelled moreporks chatting in the canopy during the night tour. Also on our night tour, we saw a huge eel in the lake, fresh water crayfish in a shallow stream, a lot of cave weta, and even glow worms.

Everybody agreed it was a memorable experience, and we all felt a strong connection with nature. We also are very thankful to the Rotokare Scenic Reserve Trust for its work and enthusiasm.



North Island robins and hihi can be seen at Rotokare.



Manawatu Forest & Bird members old and young enjoyed their visit to Rotokare Scenic Reserve.

## Getting there

**Access:** The reserve is located 12km east of Eltham, in south Taranaki.

**Accommodation:** There is no accommodation in the reserve, but there is a campsite and a motel in Eltham (20 min drive).

**More information:** Please visit the Rotokare website [www.rotokare.org.nz](http://www.rotokare.org.nz).

*\*What's your favourite wild place in New Zealand? Let us know at [editor@forestandbird.org.nz](mailto:editor@forestandbird.org.nz) and we might feature it in a future issue.*