

+ REVIEW

nerd nation by jenny nicholls



The plump little bodies of one of the world's most critically endangered birds lay where they fell on Motutapu Island for days, although the devices they were wearing transmitted a dismaying signal.

"We actually found the birds when my team were out on the island checking the transmitters," DoC's Northern Conservation Services director, Andrew Baucke, admitted to Radio New Zealand. "Each of the transmitters have a mortality function on them, so that's how they picked up the dead birds."

Takahe can live to 20, a long time for a bird. These were a young family – two four-year-old adults, a five-year-old, and a little one – gallingly, the first to hatch on the island in December last year.

The massacre, during an official pukeko cull on Motutapu, made headlines from New York to Milan. "BIRD BLAST BLUNDER" tsked leading science journal *Nature*. The *Daily Mail*, an English tabloid as far from *Nature* in content and style as the sun is from Pluto, thundered – and this is just the headline – "CONSERVATIONIST HUNTERS HIRED TO CULL INVASIVE SPECIES THREATENING NEW ZEALAND'S ENDANGERED TAKAHE BIRD APOLOGISE AFTER THEY SHOOT FOUR OF THEM BY MISTAKE... BECAUSE THEY LOOK THE SAME".

In contrast, Italy's *Il Post* reported baldly: "I CACCIATORI NEOZELANDESI HANNO AMMAZZATO GLI UCCELLI SBAGLIATI" ("New Zealand hunters killed the wrong bird").

You couldn't blame them. As the *Guardian* explained to its nine million readers: "There are now about 300

takahe alive in New Zealand. The loss of the four dead birds amounts to a five per cent decrease in the [wild] population. It is broadly equivalent to the loss of 160 tigers or 93 pandas."

The Department of Conservation, which deserves the term "beleaguered" possibly more than any other government department, is undertaking its own inquiry, and co-operating with another. The findings won't be out before this magazine goes to print. Whether heads roll into the Hauraki Gulf, one thing is clear: the exploding numbers of pukeko on the island had to be controlled if the takahe were to have a chance. Chick-eating pukeko, which (unlike the takahe) didn't evolve here, have nicked their niche. They also fight with the larger birds, and pull up seedlings planted as takahe habitat.

Ironically, our native birds now depend upon us. They are exactly what you would expect to find in a world without sharp teeth and twitching noses: unafraid of the ground and often noisy and strongly scented. To save our fauna from extinction requires a battle to control the predators we introduced. (Humans, of course, are the invasive species *par excellence*.)

Despite the cringe-making headlines, New Zealand seems, in some respects, to be making headway. We have become world experts at de-ratting islands, for instance: 117 are now pest-free, one third of the total.

"By tackling larger and larger areas, New Zealanders have expanded the boundaries of what seems possible," the *New Yorker* reported admirably

in 2014, in a piece entitled "The Big Kill: New Zealand's Crusade to Rid Itself of Mammals".

In 2012, a dying Sir Paul Callaghan called for a predator-free New Zealand. "Let's get rid of the lot. Let's get rid of all the damn mustelids, all the rats, all the possums, from the mainland islands of New Zealand. We start with Stewart Island. And we work our way up. We can do this."

As the *New Yorker* noted, fenced-in reserves and poison drops are dragging the kakapo, the South Island saddleback, the Campbell Island teal and the black robin back from the brink of oblivion.

But one stoat, one cat, one dog (and, of course, one shotgun) can undo years of work. In 1989, *Nature* published a classic piece on New Zealand conservation by famous US scientist and writer Jared Diamond. It was titled, with appalling clarity, "Nine Hundred Kiwis and a Dog".

This year, 30 of a total population of 700 South Island saddlebacks were killed by just one stoat. It's thought the beast scaled a fence in snowdrifts at the Orokonui Ecosanctuary, north of Dunedin.

Auckland ecologist James Russell is famous in conservation circles for recording the epic swim of a Norway rat between Hauraki Gulf islands and then chasing the varmint for 18 weeks before catching it. "He was a good first rat to cut my teeth on."

Russell was also involved in a study published in the journal *BioScience* which calculated the economic benefits of killing every possum, rat, and mustelid in the country to be so huge, they would outweigh the cost.

Russell thinks the real barrier to a country where kiwis can scratch a living without fear of extinction is cultural. As he put it to *North & South*: "Value-based debates can be informed by science, but finally, must involve subjective decision-making. If people want to walk dogs on the beach without leashes, they are tacitly accepting that seabirds such as penguins won't be able to coexist on the beach."

Imagine kiwis snuffing in your garden at night, instead of hedgehogs. And a world in which cats and dogs are treated with the same respect we give guns. +