

Controlling Stoats and Weasels in our Northern Forest and Urban Area

For nearly 20 years MIRO and other volunteers have done a great job in drastically reducing the possum population in the Northern Forest (the forested area adjacent to Eastbourne and the Bays). This dedicated work has helped the forest to recover and signs of this are becoming more obvious. For example, our large iconic Northern Rata now bloom profusely and the regrowth of smaller broadleaf plants is producing more seeds, providing food for birds such as rifleman, which are now regularly seen on the front faces of the forest above Eastbourne—something which hardly ever used to occur. However, the continued presence of pest animals, such as rats and stoats, makes it very difficult for many of our native birds to flourish, so some species remain classified as ‘threatened’ and ‘at risk’.

Given current resourcing and control methods, it is very difficult to effectively control the rat population in an area as large and inaccessible as the Northern Forest, but we can do something about the stoats. Stoats, along with weasels and ferrets (together known as mustelids) were introduced to NZ in the 1880s to help control rabbits. They are agile climbers and voracious predators, eating 5 to 6 times per day and, when able, killing more than they can eat and storing extra food for later. Stoats are adapted to climates with very cold winters (with little food), so in the warmer NZ environment the extra food they store is not used. Stoats also prey on rats, lizards and large insects, so removing them from the forest not only protects the birds, but also provides more insects to eat, thus making a bigger difference to their chances of survival.



Over the past year, we have been installing DOC200 stoat traps across the Northern Forest, more than tripling the number from 60 to just over 200. These traps are the rectangular wooden boxes that you quite commonly come across in various parts of the NZ forest. Inside each box is a powerful spring trap (a DOC200) and a lure (either an egg or a piece of dried rabbit meat) to attract the stoat. We know from experience elsewhere in NZ that if we operate a well-maintained network of these traps then we will keep the weasel and stoat population at sufficiently low levels to really help our native birds. It is important that the traps are not disturbed—moving the trap can trigger it, in which case it may sit there unset for up to a month. Being very powerful (so that they kill humanely), the traps are dangerous if not handled by someone trained in their use.

In addition to MIRO volunteers, this first phase of stoat control has been made possible through the support of Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) and the use of other volunteers, such as the Days Bay Menzshed and the Eastbourne Scouts. We are also extending the mustelid control to our urban area and the associated foreshore and coast through the ERAT Project, with great support from Hutt City Council and from the Ministry for the Environment through a Community Environment Fund grant. Trapping near the coast is especially important for protecting ground-nesting shore birds, such as Little (Blue) Penguins and Banded Dotterels.

And what about the rats then? The ERAT Project is currently gaining momentum very quickly, so will soon result in a very low rat and mustelid population in our urban environment and, shortly after, our foreshore and coastline. As mentioned above, controlling the rat population in the Northern Forest is more difficult because it is larger and more inaccessible. However new approaches, such as the deployment of new-generation self-resetting traps, ‘trap triggered’ signalling systems, and

intensified trapping of preferred rat habitats, all offer hope for the future. This is indeed an exciting time to be involved in conservation!

Terry Webb, MIRO Chair

Interested in helping MIRO? Email: info@miro.org.nz