Translocation of North Island Robins to the Northern Forest, East Harbour Regional Park

Many people will be familiar with the 'cheeky' nature of the robin, having watched a bird flit to the ground to find bugs in the leaf litter when walking in the forest on Kapiti Island or Zealandia. Given the friendly nature of these birds, MIRO and its supporters decided that it would be great to see them return to the Northern Forest.


Banded released adult

A proposal was submitted to the Department of Conservation early in 2008 to return North Island robins to the Mainland Island (that portion of the Northern Forest where predators, especially possums and rats, were being held at low levels due to intensive trapping and rat poisoning). The application was successful and, with funding from the Lion Foundation, the project got underway with birds sourced from the Waitotara Valley in Whanganui, with the approval of local Iwi Nga Rauru and also local Hutt Valley and Wellington Iwi.

Very bad weather reduced the window of opportunity for collection in Whanganui during the winter of 2008, but a total of 28 birds were collected for release in July and August. Unfortunately, 5 birds died prior to the August release. Following the releases, a monitoring programme was started to locate the birds—a considerable task given the potential area for dispersal.

Follow-up monitoring showed that most of the birds were located in the Gollans Stream catchment extending from the eastern headwaters to the picnic area in the south. Two male robins were seen in the Remutaka Forest Park and the mainland island area of the Wainuiomata water catchment. While this was a positive sign for the long-term dispersal of the robin population, it was a loss for the fledgling Northern Forest population.

The first sighting of an un-banded robin in the Northern Forest—firm evidence that at least one pair of birds had bred successfully—was made by Global Volunteers carrying out their routine monthly possum trap servicing in Gollans Valley in March 2009. All of the North Island robins introduced to the Park in 2008 were fitted with coloured leg bands so that the birds could be individually identified. One of the Global Volunteers, Jamie Poe, managed to snap a photo of the bird as it approached the group (see opposite).

In February 2010, on a walk into the Gollans catchment, MIRO volunteers Colin Ross and Rob Finch saw and photographed a juvenile robin near the banks of Gollans Stream (see opposite). This was the first un-banded bird sighted that season and was further evidence that breeding had been occurring. At this time, monitoring had recorded 12 of the original birds that had been released.

The last known surviving Whanganui bird was a male from a pair that had been resident at the upper Gollans forks, sighted in December 2012. This bird was at least 5 years old and the pair had survived and bred successfully for 4 years outside the Mainland Island.

After extensive planning and fundraising by MIRO members, MIRO, along with DOC, Greater Wellington and other volunteers (about 80 people in all) successfully translocated a further 40 North Island robins, this time from Kapiti Island, to the Butterfly Creek area in April 2011. A requirement of the translocation permit was that the birds be monitored and part of this monitoring involved undertaking an extensive grid search the following September. However, the ensuing search of likely robin habitats south of Mt Lowry came up with no sightings, which was a surprising and very disappointing result. Fortunately, less than a week later, three birds, two banded and one un-banded, were seen in an area that had been thoroughly searched, highlighting how difficult it was to reliably determine population numbers.

A further translocation of robins from Kapiti Island to the Butterfly Creek area took place in April 2012 under the same permit as for the previous year. This was essentially a re-run of the earlier operation with a further 40 birds being successfully released, bringing the total number released to 103.

In August 2012 another extensive robin search was undertaken, this time identifying 15 birds. Following that search, robins continued to be sighted, with some reports being of un-banded birds, indicating that they were the offspring of introduced birds. Between April 2013 and July 2014 there were 15 reported sightings, many of which were un-banded.

In late 2014, given the uncertainty around the number of surviving birds—key information to inform a decision about further translocations—MIRO and Greater Wellington contracted Delia Small to search for robins and to monitor those she found. She did this for several months over the 2014/15 summer, including the breeding season. The few birds Delia found and monitored appeared healthy and were breeding. By the end of her contract Delia had confirmed the presence of five birds, and possibly more, within a narrow area of the park.

The fact that some of the birds from the three releases had survived for up to 4 years and were successfully breeding showed that the habitat in parts of the forest was suitable for robins. However, predation within, and dispersal outside of, the protected Mainland Island were likely to be the two biggest problems in establishing a more sustainable robin population. Predation within the Mainland Island had earlier been tackled by increasing the number of DOC200 stoat traps as well as targeting feral cats within the Mainland Island, although how effective this had been was uncertain. Across the rest of the Northern Forest there was little protection from these predators or from rats, which were only intensively poisoned inside the Mainland Island.

In terms of dispersal, robins are territorial birds and it is likely that their movements are restricted in their normal habitats by encounters with other robins. In the Northern Forest, with such a low population, it is likely that many birds dispersed widely, as they will not have encountered other bird's territories to prevent them from doing so. This would have inevitably led them into unprotected areas with high predator numbers. The only solution to the dispersal problem would have been a significant extension to the Mainland Island, but this was seen as challenging, given the shape and geographical location of the Northern Forest.

To inform future decisions, MIRO contracted Elizabeth Parlato to feed the specifics of the Northern Forest situation into a model she had developed for assessing the critical success factors of robin reintroductions, with a focus on dispersal. Her model predicted that the chances of success within the existing Mainland Island would be positive, but only marginally so. This happened to describe the situation at the time, where a few second generation birds were surviving in the Park, healthy but at numbers too low to be considered sustainable. She also modelled a future scenario with a significantly extended Mainland Island (essentially the whole Northern Forest) and this showed that a far more positive outcome could be expected. It was thus decided not to revisit the idea of further robin translocations until the existing Mainland Island was significantly extended.

Since that time MIRO, with the support of Greater Wellington, has extended stoat and feral cat trapping across most of the Northern Forest. However, in terms of rat control, trials of self-resetting traps have shown disappointing results, so they are not currently seen as an effective solution. Nor is the use of conventional rat traps, due to the large number of traps and servicing effort that would be required. However new approaches, such as improvements to self-resetting traps, 'trap triggered' signalling systems, and intensified trapping of preferred rat habitats, all offer hope for the future.