

Catching Possums in our Park

Twenty years ago, many of the tree species in the Northern Forest behind Eastbourne were being decimated by possums. This was especially true for rata, with whole trees dying and others with 'stags heads'—large dead branches high in the canopy. The damage spurred Councils and local volunteers into action. Through the use of poisons to achieve the initial knock-down and the establishment of an extensive trap network, serviced regularly by MIRO and other volunteers, possum numbers are now kept at a low level. As a result, the tree canopy has recovered to the point where it is now hard to spot a 'stags head' in the latest Google Earth imagery. So, for now, we are confident that if we continue the existing trapping effort (400+ traps serviced monthly) we will protect the forest from possums until improved control measures are developed as a part of Predator Free 2050.

Down at the Parangarau Lakes the possum control story is different. For a start, this area had been cleared for farming and is now in the very early stages of forest regeneration. To speed up the regeneration process MIRO, working with Greater Wellington and local Iwi, has planted small plots of locally sourced native tree species to provide a seed source for birds to disperse throughout the area. Possums, of course, find the young trees very tasty compared to gorse, so we protect each plot with some possum traps. Now that the earlier plantings are producing seed, there is a need to control possums over the whole area, not just at the plots. To this end, Greater Wellington installed 40 new possum traps in 2018, serviced monthly by MIRO volunteers. While we are yet to achieve the low possum numbers of the Northern Forest, we know we will eventually get there.

You may wonder why, given the low possum numbers, have we had poisoning campaigns over the past two years. The poisoning has been organised by OSPRI (formerly TB-free NZ) to try to eradicate bovine tuberculosis in the lower North Island (one of just a few places in New Zealand where it has not already been eradicated). Bovine TB badly affects our dairy herds. If the possum population can be kept below 2% (catch rate) for a few years, Bovine TB will die out. Our trapping efforts over the past 17 years have kept the possum population in the Northern Forest well below the 5% threshold required for forest recovery, but we don't quite reach the 2% level, hence the need for the OSPRI campaigns. The 2017/18 campaign reduced possums to about 2% for the area from the Northern Forest through to the Lakes and, for a while, the detection rate in the centre of the Northern Forest was zero.

So, it is thanks to those early stalwarts taking on trapping that our forest is in such good health. Many of our early trappers are now getting on in years so are not as capable of trapping as they used to be. Fortunately, through the interest and awareness created by the ERAT Project, a new cohort of volunteers is coming through to take their place to ensure the forest remains in good shape.

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