Pest Control in our Northern Forest—Where are we at?

Many of you will know that in the 1990's the possum browsing in the forest behind Eastbourne was so bad that our large Rata trees were being decimated. Through a concerted effort of poisoning and trapping by local volunteers supported by Hutt City Council, the possum numbers were eventually controlled. Since then, continued trapping by MIRO volunteers, with the support of Greater Wellington, have kept the numbers low enough for our forest to begin its recovery. For example, over the past five years, the annual number of possums trapped has been under 200, with 181 trapped last.

While monitoring data show that possum numbers are always below the level required for the forest to regenerate, the numbers are not sufficiently low to eradicate Bovine TB, which is why OSPRI (formerly TB-free NZ) undertake ground-based and aerial poisoning every few years.

With possums consistently supressed allowing forest regeneration, what is the wider strategy for pest control? Large pest animals such as deer, pigs and goats are controlled by professional hunters contracted by Greater Wellington as well as private hunters during the annual hunting ballot in April. Deer especially need to be kept at very low levels so that vulnerable plant species can recover and provide food for our fructivorous (berry-eating) native birds.

MIRO's Mark Nicholas clears a rat from a DOC200 trap

Small pest animals that need to be controlled include stoats and weasels (mustelids), hedgehogs, feral cats and rats. All pose a direct threat to our native birds and, in the case of rats, compete for food, especially seeds and berries. Four years ago we achieved effective stoat trap coverage of the forest using DOC200 traps (the rectangular wooden boxes you see). These traps also catch weasels, hedgehogs and rats and are re-baited monthly by MIRO's volunteer trappers. Last year we caught 18 mustelids, down from the peak of 43 that was caused by the beech mast 2 years ago.

Unlike the mustelids, the hedgehog catch has increased of late, with 77 caught last year. This is of some concern as they are the main predator of ground nesting birds eggs, although the increase may in part be due to more effective trapping. Greater Wellington undertake pest monitoring in the forest four times each year and over the past two years the hedgehog numbers have been stable, which is reassuring.

Over the past three years we have tried to control feral cats in the Northern Forest with a network of 28 feral cat traps, which are kept well away from built-up areas, but in that time have only caught one feral cat. We recently upgraded these traps to a more effective type, thanks to a very generous donation from the late Jan Heine.

So how do we know how effective our trapping efforts are? As mentioned above, Greater Wellington do undertake regular monitors, but it is thought that mustelids may be shy of tracking tunnels. For the past 18 months, again with Greater Wellington support, we have been monitoring

automatic lure feeders (ZIP Motolures, dispensing mayonnaise once per day) with trail cameras. We move these around our traplines every few months, the idea being to detect all pests, including those who are trap shy. To date we have occupied 7 sites and, of those sites, 5 have had rats, 3 possums, 1 hedgehog, 2 stoats (one later caught nearby) and there were no feral cats. We would like to think that seeing just two stoats in all that time might be OK given they are wide-ranging, and seeing no feral cats is also good news.

We are not currently able to control rats throughout most of the forest, so having 5 of 7 sites with rats is not unexpected. Greater Wellington control rats fairly effectively inside a Mainland Island, which covers about 20% of the forest, using closely-spaced poison feeders. Our next challenge is to gradually extend this rat-free area to cover most of the forest, a project which will be much easier to sustain if we have effective urban trapping in Wainuiomata, in addition to what we already have across Eastbourne and the Bays through the ERAT project.

Terry Webb, MIRO Chair

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