



Tuturuatu (shore plover).



From left, Kelly Body, Toby Cantwell and Tara Swan.



Kākāriki and kōwhai.

## for the birds

As the region's best gardeners welcome visitors during this month's garden festival, here's an insider's tour of the wildlife centre that will benefit from their fundraising.

A tīeke (saddleback) dines out on coprosma berries.





## *When I first visited the Mt Bruce Wildlife Reserve as a child, it felt like a small shed with a few birds in the middle of nowhere.*

**T**hose memories are a far cry from the impressive visitor centre, shop and cafe that now greet visitors to the reserve, located on State Highway 2, just 30km north of Masterton. It is just as well that one thing hasn't changed – New Zealand wildlife is still the star of the show.

The Pūkaha National Wildlife Centre (the name was changed after a 2016 Treaty of Waitangi settlement) is a restored forest and captive breeding site. The 55-hectare native bird reserve is home to 16 different species, including brown kiwi, pāteke (brown teal), whio (blue duck), takahē, kōkako, kākā, kākārīki (parakeet), hihi (stitchbird), titipounamu (rifleman) and tuturuatu (shore plover).

Visitors to Pūkaha can wander along gentle tracks through the towering bush while viewing a variety of New Zealand wildlife – including gecko and tuatara – inside the enclosures and free-flight aviary. Pou (signposts) throughout the reserve connect visitors with Māori whakapapa, providing rich stories about the wildlife and forest.

Currently, five bird species – kākārīki, kākā, kiwi, pāteke and tuturuatu – are bred at the centre. Many of these are released into the almost 900 hectares of restored native forest surrounding Pūkaha, while some are sent to sanctuaries and other sites around New Zealand.

The rarest bird bred at Pūkaha is the little tuturuatu, of which there are only 250 left in the country.

There are generally about 80 birds living at the centre, although in the peak breeding season that can increase to 150 or even 200.

“Breeding season is mayhem,” says Tara Swan, Senior Conservation Ranger. “Every nest box is full, the aviary is full, there are human kids running around, bird children flying around...”

A two-hour loop track takes visitors into the forest, where work is ongoing to remove pest plants such as gorse, old man's beard and broom. “It's just like backyard gardening but on a bigger scale,” says Toby Cantwell, Predator Control Manager. “We are lucky that it's remnant bush, and because a lot of people don't go in there, the plant pests are mostly on the outer edges.”

Animal pest control is also important. As an unfenced reserve, Pūkaha relies heavily on its trapping network, along with other pest control methods, to keep rats, stoats,

possums, ferrets, weasels and feral cats at bay. There are just fewer than 1000 traps in the reserve itself and another 575 in the surrounding buffer zone. Removing predators entirely is unrealistic, so the goal is to reduce them to a point that native birds can survive and breed successfully.

“We have had some great successes and others not so great,” says Toby. “We've taken a lot of steps to do better – for example, adding traps and monitoring and reviewing our success – but it's very hard to measure.”

Many people are surprised by the impact that rats can have on native wildlife.

“They can climb trees and predate on birds, whether it's parents, chicks or eggs,” adds Toby. “When you start trapping in your garden you will probably catch rats at first. Then you will catch a weasel because the rats attracted bigger predators. Even if it's just in your garden predators are often linked.”

To reduce predators in your garden, Toby recommends attending a trapping and tracking workshop first to learn some skills. Set a realistic goal, and if you want to do more, consider getting involved in a community group or starting one yourself.

Pūkaha is run by a charitable trust underpinned by a three-way partnership between Rangitāne iwi, the National Wildlife Centre and the Department of Conservation. Funding for Pūkaha comes from many sources, including visitor entrance fees, corporate sponsorship, grants and fundraising. The annual Wairarapa Garden Festival (November 4 & 5, 2023) is expected to raise about \$100,000 for the centre's conservation and education programmes.

Pūkaha recently opened a multi-million dollar environmental education centre, designed to accommodate up to 120 people during the day and 40 overnight. Students from early childhood to tertiary level can benefit from the education sessions run by Pūkaha here to connect them with the ngahere (forest) and manu (birds).

“Schools in this area are already very ‘nature connected’ so we help them by running workshops on biodiversity and predator monitoring, along with providing traps,” says Kelly Body, Education Manager.

Real-world data such as that obtained from Pūkaha's trapping network is used to support internal assessments for secondary students. “We want to create a whole generation of kids who are excited about the forest and might even be future employees here,” says Kelly. ■



**MARISA KING** caught the gardening bug from her parents while growing up in Ōtaki. She is an enthusiastic home gardener and enjoys growing flowers, shrubs and veges on a quarter-acre section in Masterton.