WEKA LIBERATION IN NORTHLAND

By D. B. ROBERTSON

ABSTRACT

A colony of North Island Wekas *(Gallirallus australis greyi)* has been successfully established at Rawhiti, Bay of Islands, as a result of five liberations in the summers of 1966-1971.

This account is written mainly to help other amateurs who may consider obtaining wekas from the Wildlife Service and trying to establish colonies elsewhere. The number of birds required is discussed as well as details concerning the construction of the cage, time in the cage, and feeding.

The account describes the effect of predators on the birds and the effect of wekas on other wildlife and the neighbours. It includes a map of the area illustrating a weka count in the Rawhiti area during January 1976. Most of the wekas counted at that time were bred in the area.

This contribution describes the planned establishment of a colony of North Island Wekas *(Gallirallus australis greyi)* at Rawhiti, Bay of Islands, during the period January 1967 to January 1976 (Fig. 1). As the birds from this colony are breeding and spreading over an increasingly large area and growing in number, it seems important to describe at this stage the methods used and results to date.

The North Island Weka, according to Falla, Sibson & Turbott (1970), was common in Northland until the 1930s; by 1940 they had disappeared from there and most other parts of the North Island except the Gisborne area. It has been suggested that some disease passed through North Island populations but missed the Gisborne area. My own observations of the rate of breeding and ability to escape from abundant cats and dogs, give some support to the view that disease rather than predators is likely to have caused their disappearance.

In 1966 I obtained permission from the Wildlife Service of the Department of Internal Affairs to try liberating this species and the Department supplied me with five lots of birds as follows:

December 1966 — 32 birds; December 1967 — 32 birds; 1968 — nil; December 1969 — 32 birds; December 1970 — 37 birds; December 1971 — 16 birds.

All birds had been banded before delivery; unfortunately it was not possible to sex them accurately although the exceptionally large-billed individuals were tentatively listed as males.

The Wildlife officers caught the birds in the Gisborne area on each occasion between October and December and in December put

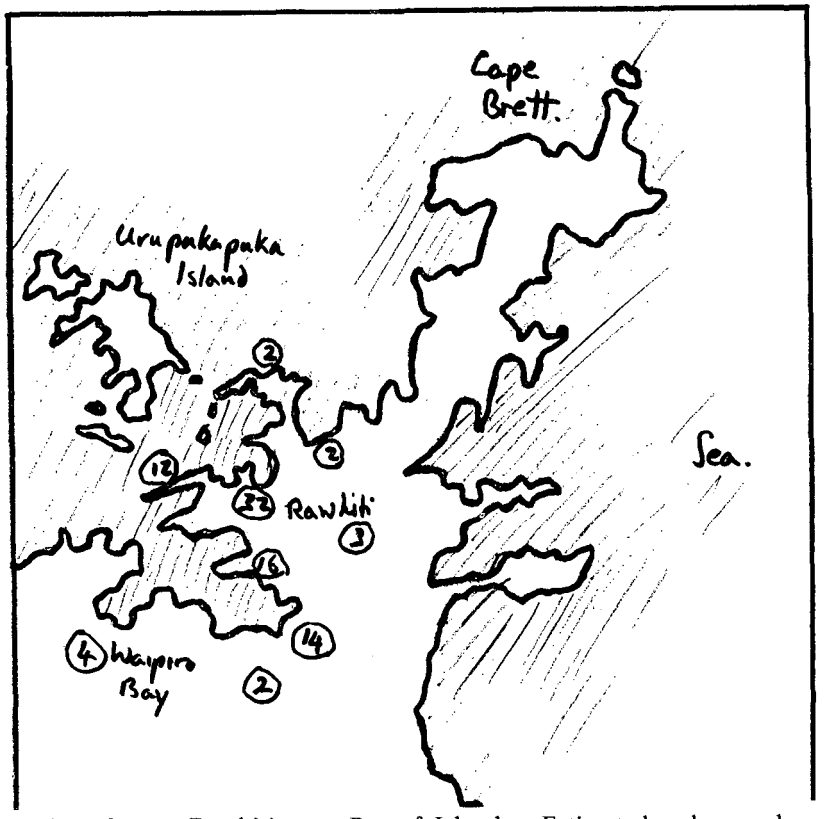

FIGURE 1 — Rawhiti area, Bay of Islands. Estimated weka numbers in January 1976 in circles.

them in boxes for transport. The first two lots were flown to Auckland by National Airways Corporation and I collected them at Auckland Airport, fed them that evening, and next day packed the boxes into the back of a station wagon and set off on a hot (smelly!) trip to Rawhiti. After 1968 N.A.C. refused to carry birds on passenger planes, so they were delivered to Hamilton by road and I drove them from there the 426 km to Rawhiti. Thirty-two birds at a time proved to be quite a convenient number, and more would certainly be difficult to handle. They travelled well, although one died by becoming wedged in the slats of one box. During the trip they made occasional squeaks but never their loud call. The boxes, designed by Mr Fisher of the Wildlife Service, proved very satisfactory and allowed easy feeding during transit.

On arrival at Rawhiti in the evening the boxes were carried down a hill and the birds released in my prepared cage. The boxes were scrubbed out and later returned by rail to Gisborne.

One happening of some interest while the birds were being moved from Gisborne to the Bay of Islands was the escape and recapture of one of the banded birds: in December 1967, while feeding the birds in Auckland during the overnight stop in my garage in Remuera, two of the more slender birds wriggled through the slats of their boxes and escaped. One was caught, but the other disappeared into the darkness and was lost amongst the oxalis and other plants in my garden. I told Mr E. G. Turbott at the Auckland Museum about this escaped bird, and, much to my surprise, six weeks later he telephoned me to say that a farmer about 72 km south of Auckland had caught the bird and read the number of its band (15218) before releasing it again. This weka must have negotiated the busy areas of Greenlane, Ellerslie, Penrose, Otahuhu and beyond before reaching open country. This illustrates the tendency of wekas to travel for long distances if released in a strange area, a phenomenon noted in the case of previous releases, and the main reason for my decision to keep my birds in cages for some time before release.

AREA USED FOR LIBERATION

The Rawhiti district of the Bay of Islands is situated near the base of the Cape Brett peninsula and fronts on to the Bay of Islands at the south side of the Albert Passage. In 1966 there was no road into the area but since 1967 the Rawhiti Road has been extended about 8 km and passes right through the area used for liberating the birds (Fig. 2). The country is hilly, and is covered mostly by patches of manuka, some second growth bush, and quite large areas of partly grazed grass containing smaller areas of manuka. There are a few streams which almost dry up in the summer, as do the small swampy areas. The whole area is usually very dry in January and February. The coastline is typical of the east coast. In 1966 there were about three farmers' families and four other permanent residents in the district. Now a large number of people come to camp in January at a motor camp by the old Rawhiti school, but from March to December there are few people in the area. There is plenty of natural cover for the birds and most of the Rawhiti area has a wilderness character apart from the farms about Parakura Bay and Whangamumu Harbour.

I live in Auckland, but while the birds were in the pre-release cage, my family and friends arranged holidays at Rawhiti to feed them. We have been at Rawhiti for weekends and holidays frequently between 1966-1976.

THE CAGE

As mentioned above, previous experience suggested that it would be best to keep the wekas in a cage for at least six weeks before liberating them. The cage or enclosure was built like a tennis court 40 feet by 25 feet (12 x 7 m) on a hillside beside a stream and near the sea. One end of the enclosure contained grass, and the other end was covered in 3 foot (0.9 m) high manuka at first — this grew

FIGURE 2 — Habitat in area of release. Photo: D. Robb

to a height of 12 feet (3.6 m) in later years. Two rough shelters were made of dead manuka, and two small wooden boxes were left inside.

The wire-netting fence was 6 feet (1.8 m) high and consisted of 2-inch (50 mm) wire-netting held up by steel stakes (half inch deformed steel reinforcing rods, 7 feet (2.1 m) long), hammered into the ground and supported by occasional guy ropes. Manuka was cut back from inside the wire to stop the wekas climbing up and jumping over (important as accounts of previous attempts to cage the birds indicated that they could escape readily in this way).

As the hillside had an uneven surface I found it easier to use 3 ft (0.9 m) rolls of netting, one above the other, rather than 6 ft (1.8 m) rolls as the shorter could be fitted more easily into the bumps on the ground. The netting was fixed to steel posts with wire and stapled firmly into the ground all round the bottom. The staples were made of No. 8 fence wire bent to U shape, six inches (150 mm) long, and fixed the netting to the ground.

A small door was made for access through the wire-netting and a small concrete water trough put inside, near the wire, so that it could be filled more readily from outside. Wekas drink quite a lot of water and use even more for bathing. They frequently get into the drinking trough 3 ft x 1 ft x 5 in deep (0.9 m x 0.3 m x 127 mm), put their heads under water and then stand up so that the water runs down over their backs; after this there is much vigorous jumping up and down and flapping of wings, and all this activity half empties

the water trough. This may occur in pouring rain just as often as in dry weather. I still keep a few water troughs about 5 inches (125 mm) deep about the property and they are used frequently. I think the only wekas to escape from the cage did so in the later liberations when the manuka was taller and some were able to climb up and jump over the wire.

The manuka gave shade and cover during hot afternoons and the wekas often perched about five feet from the ground on the manuka branches, especially in the afternoons. The enclosure described is of about the right size for about 32 birds.

TIME IN THE CAGE

The wekas did not appear to enjoy their stay in the cage, and after a month the 32 birds had worn out the grass through their continual pacing up and down; they were particularly prone to go round and round just inside the wire. Thus with most of the groups, after four weeks had passed I let out two or three every few days and put food and water outside, keeping only 8-10 birds for the whole six weeks. This timing seemed effective, probably because the liberated birds stayed reasonably close to those still in the cage.

FEEDING

The water trough was kept full for drinking all the time (see above). The birds were fed twice a day. Bread seemed the most popular food, but meat and meat bones and all food scraps, and piper and sprats caught in the net, were popular and helped when other food was not available. I tried some fowl mash and put some in the cage each night; it was a week or two before they began to eat this, but finally they would eat most of it. They seemed to be prepared to eat any animal, vegetable or insect food except lettuce and cabbage.

PREDATORS

Only one weka died in the cage and that was after being attacked at night, I think by another bird. There was remarkably little fighting in the cage.

During the past ten years I have used opossum traps to catch feral cats which are common at Rawhiti; I catch more wekas than cats now, but of course the wekas are released. Two stoats have been shot. Opossums arrived in the Rawhiti area in 1974.

Dogs are actively discouraged from the area. Most of the dogs there come with people illegally shooting on the property. I requested the Bay of Islands Acclimatisation Society to declare the area a " Closed Game Area " because shooters ignore the " No Shooting " signs when I am not there, but without success. The shooters' dogs have been a nuisance since the weka begins breeding during the shooting season.

There are still plenty of predators about, but the wekas are increasing and are helped by the natural cover through which they can run so fast.

Without prior notification the local rabbit board spread poison liberally in 1975 on an adjacent property and I suspect that this killed some birds. Incidentally, there are very few rabbits in the area. I have seen a weka chasing a young rabbit, and it seems likely that the presence of wekas will finally have a deterrent effect upon rabbits.

I have found nests of Pheasants, Californian Quail, Skylarks and Pipits in the area, and during the past ten years since the liberations began the number of Pheasants and Californian Quail seen with broods appears to have increased; families of these species have been watched as they have matured, indicating good breeding success. I have twice seen feral cats eating recently caught hen pheasants. Pipits seem fewer in number than before, but the Skylarks are plentiful.

NUISANCE EFFECT AND RELATIONS WITH NEIGHBOURS

The few neighbours were keen about this project but one farmer had reservations when he found one weka pecking at a kumara in his shed ! I am sure that in large numbers their curiosity may make them a nuisance at times, and they may scratch out plants in the vegetable garden when looking for insects; they may peck tomatoes and sometimes grapefruit lying on the ground. In spite of this I consider that any harm they cause is much more than compensated for by the good they do in eating insects and larvae, and in cleaning up dead animals and catching rats and mice. It might be added that some of the damage to crops attributed to wekas is certainly caused by pheasants.

NUMBER OF WEKAS NEEDED TO MAKE A PRMANENT COLONY

I believe in view of my experience as described above that it would be a waste of time to liberate one batch of wekas and not repeat this in the following years. This is supported by the following comparison of my own and other liberations. During the last ten years the Wildlife Service has supplied wekas as follows:—

1. One batch of 32 birds to the Russell Forestry Unit in 1967 in an area 20 miles south of Rawhiti.
2. Two batches of 32 to Mrs Cochrane of South Kaipara Head in 1968 and 1969.
3. Five batches of about 32 birds to me at Rawhiti between 1967-1972 as above.

The one lot to the Russell Forestry Unit were set free after six weeks, and an informant there told me that they did not see or hear them again after three months.

The two batches supplied to Mrs Cochrane at Kaipara South Head were carefully locked after in a cage for six weeks. The first were freed near a young pine forest and the second on their own farm. Within a month or two dead wekas were found about the area, probably as the result of the large amounts of rabbit poison laid in the district. Mrs Cochrane has informed me that the only evidence

of any survivor came in 1974 when she saw a pair with two chicks on the road 16 km from their farm.

Details of my experience with the five lots of about 32 wekas each liberated at Rawhiti are as follows:—

In December 1967 and December 1968 there were two consecutive liberations. In December 1969 there were no liberations so that it was possible to ascertain whether the earlier ones of the two previous years had survived. In the winter of 1969 a number were heard calling. In March 1970 I saw the first unbanded bird (born locally) and in May 1970 saw a pair with two young chicks.

My impression, at present, is that the weka population in the narrow 10 mile (16 km) strip from Cape Brett to Whangaruru North Head is more than 95. I expect there are unrecorded wekas on Cape Brett now, but so far I have not been able to carry out observations in this area. The increasingly loud chorus of calls in the evenings at Rawhiti indicates a thriving colony. Luckily the loud call of the weka can be heard a long way and this helps counting in inaccessible places.

Wekas have three call notes. The first is the short squeak, and is the alarm call when suddenly disturbed. The second is the " boomp boomp boomp " noise common to some rails, heard when they are scratching about for grubs. Thirdly, the loud " cooee cooee " call upon which my counts are based, heard mainly at sunset, but also at any time of day or night; this seems to be a contact call.

I have five wekas that I can recognise about the house, but when making these counts there were either no calls or just one from this group of five. It is thus very probable that there are many more wekas in an area than those heard calling.

Apart from the newly restored wekas, there are kiwis throughout the area shown on the map.

Now that these wekas are breeding so well no further liberations seem necessary to support them, and in about five years' time I hope to write a short report about the state of this colony.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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LITERATURE CITED

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