Following Takahē into a new home

James Hunter
PhD Student
Department of Zoology
University of Otago

Predicting the outcomes of any reintroduction is a difficult task. Many variable and uncertain factors interact to determine the success of population establishment and persistence following an initial release. However, accurate prediction of post-release outcomes is vital for maximising the chances of reintroduction success. As reintroductions are a high-intensity investment and high-profile management option, failed attempts can be disastrous for species management.

Following from increasing success in the conservation of takahē (*Porphyrio hochstetteri*), there is now a stable and increasing metapopulation of these iconic birds spread between wild and managed sites throughout New Zealand (Takahē Annual Report 2016-17, Department of Conservation). However, this success has created a new challenge for takahē conservation; where to put new birds now that current sites are reaching capacity? The Takahē Recovery Group began the search for new mainland reintroduction sites in 2016 (DOC, personal communication) and in March 2018 the first mainland reintroduction of the species took place in the Gouland Downs, Kahurnagi National Park; a truly historic moment for the species. My project studies this newly established population from the time and point of release in order to provide the best possible knowledge base for the continued successful management of the species, both in Kahurangi and in future reintroduction sites.

In order to closely monitor the birds released in Kahurangi, 16 of the 30 released birds were fitted with PinPoint 120 satellite tags (SirTrack ltd., Havelock North, New Zealand). An additional 15 PinPoint 240 satellite tags (SirTrack ltd., Havelock North, New Zealand) were purchased with the aid of the BirdsNZ research fund in 2019, for rolling deployment, enabling continued monitoring of the reintroduced population.

Data from the first year of GPS monitoring show that the released birds have established into settled home ranges close to their release sites, confirming the suitability of the area for takahē. In addition to this, two chicks were fledged in the Gouland downs in the 2018-19 breeding season, the first wild birds to be fledged outside of Fiordland in over a century! Health data collected during the tag retrieval/deployment trips in April and July 2019 also indicate that the birds are in good condition following the tussock mast event last summer, with birds maintaining healthy weights of 2.16-3.25kg. So, at 15 months following the first release of birds into the Gouland Downs all signs are positive. However, it is still early days yet for the new population just finding its' feet, and it is vital we keep closely following the reintroduced population for a number of years to learn all we can from the experience. By doing so we can ensure that the global population of takahē continues to grow and is restored to an increasingly wild and unmanaged state.