

Science and the Protection of our Native Birdlife

In 2008, researchers discovered a disease in kakariki (red crowned parakeets) from Little Barrier Island, which has big implications for all native parrots of New Zealand. Psittacine beak and feather disease, or PBF, is a virus that has been a major concern for parrot conservation projects worldwide, causing up to a 100% death rate in young or juvenile parrots. Adult birds affected by PBF tend to lose their feathers over a long period, and eventually succumb to other diseases as the virus causes their immune system to fail.

We know that Eastern rosellas on the mainland carry PBF, and they may be spreading it to native parrot populations such as the kakariki. However, there are many questions still to be answered about this disease, including whether its spread could cause serious population declines, especially in the critically endangered kakapo and orange fronted parakeets.

In April 2011, a team from the Auckland Zoo examined 53 kakariki on Tiritiri Matangi, as part of a long-term project to learn more about this PBF, and monitor the health of kakariki on the island. Led by Bethany Jackson, the resident veterinarian at the Auckland Zoo, this project will also study Eastern rosellas on the mainland, to find out what current risk these birds pose to our native parrots. The PBF virus found in New Zealand could have come from Australia via exotic parrots such as the Eastern rosella, or it may be a unique New Zealand version of the virus. In collaboration with Dr Arvind Varsani, a virus expert from the University of Canterbury, the project will try to answer questions as to when the virus arrived, and what strains are currently out there.

This disease highlights the risks that the international trade in pets can pose to native animals. An estimated 1.5 million live birds are traded annually, with each movement of birds having the potential to introduce exotic diseases into new areas or countries. The consequences for native wildlife can be disastrous if these pets escape into the wild whilst carrying a new disease. Therefore, everyone has a role to play in protecting native wildlife, simply by keeping pets properly contained. PBF is relatively common in captive parrots therefore any accidental release could have serious consequences.

The kakariki project is supported by the Department of Conservation, and the Auckland Zoo Conservation Fund. 360 Discovery Ferry Services have generously sponsored ferry tickets for researchers and volunteers, as part of their commitment to helping conservation work on the Hauraki Gulf Islands. Bivouac Outdoor has sponsored a GPS, and special hand warmers to keep the kakariki warm during anaesthesia in the field. These will be especially important during the winter trips. Finally, the work would not be possible without the Supporters of Tiritiri Matangi, who so enthusiastically advocate for New Zealand's native fauna and conservation in all that they do. ■



Bethany Jackson
with Kakariki



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