

# IN SEARCH OF A GHOST

The South Island kokako was classified extinct in 2004, but two ornithologists believe New Zealand's most enigmatic bird still exists in the island's deepest forests. MARC CHECKLEY reports.

New Zealand has its own Loch Ness Monster but this creature does not swim in our great lakes, it prances on the branches of South Island forests.

The South Island kokako, also known as the "grey ghost", is one of two subspecies of wattle bird unique to New Zealand. The southern bird is identified by the bright orange or yellow wattles that hang from its beak.

Over the past 40 years ornithologists Ron Nilsson and Rhys Buckingham have been scouring the South Island bush in search of the kokako. Despite little substantive evidence, they are convinced a number of birds still haunt the forests of the northern West Coast, Fiordland and Stewart Island.

"They've proven to be very difficult over the years to locate. They really are ghosts," says Buckingham.

"They have a very secretive and furtive behaviour. Only three nests have been found in New Zealand's ornithological history."

In 1989, the Department of Conservation tried unsuccessfully to coax the birds out of hiding with the help of a North Island kokako in a cage.

"The bird mysteriously died before any work was done," says Buckingham. "DoC hasn't done anything since."

Adding to its mystique, much evidence of the southern bird's existence has been lost or destroyed.

A feather found on Stewart Island in 1987 is now considered lost, while the only recording of its unique song went up in flames during a house fire in 1998.

"The guy who made the recording wasn't known for his intelligence. He didn't make any copies," says Buckingham.

Two years ago the Department of Conservation declared the subspecies extinct.

Andrew Grant, DoC's advisory scientist for the Canterbury region, says the door is

never completely closed on a species but the department needs compelling evidence to readdress the issue.

"There are so many endangered species we have to look after. We'd have to take

modern adaptations like the tui.

Nilsson says that during the 1970s an enormous effort was put into finding the native kakapo, the world's only flightless parrot, when only two were thought to



away from other recovery programmes for something that is considered extinct.

Former Wildlife and DoC ranger Ron Nilsson says he has a tome of anecdotal evidence gathered over the last 30 years from more than 100 people, stating they have either seen the bird or heard its call.

"I think it's appalling that they don't support people like me.

"DoC are supposed to be the guardians of our natural heritage. These birds are around 80 million years old."

The kokako is said to have more similarities with the extinct huia than with

remain. In 1977, 200 were discovered on Stewart Island.

Grant empathises with both Nilsson and Buckingham but says it is a matter of prioritising.

He says the department has to be wary of hidden agendas, citing the infamous moa hoax by three North Island bushmen in 1993.

The bird's angelic song has continued to keep the grey ghost's legend alive. Buckingham and Nilsson say its tune is unmistakable and can still be heard on rare occasions.

Nilsson describes the call as a series of high-pitched flute-like notes that can be heard up to 500m away.

Buckingham heard it for the first time in a remote valley on Stewart Island.

"It wiped off anything else in the forest. You can't let go of the sound, it's exquisite.

"I heard it again only three days ago. It sends the forest into a flux, the tuis go mad."

Buckingham says the bird is a minority in the bush and may be keeping quiet on purpose so as not to draw attention to itself.

"One episode, near Murchison, I heard the call from a beech tree. The tuis began dive bombing one branch of the tree."

He says that for the sake of survival the kokako wants to remain anonymous.

Nilsson agrees, "When it makes itself known all the birds react. You hear them go 'holy shit what the hell is that!'."

"These birds can live up to 20 years of age. There's a chance the last kokako could be males. If they are, we have a problem."

Nilsson predicts fewer than 50 South Island kokako remain, scattered in pockets of dense forest.

Grant says there is more involved than harassment and lack of offspring.

"There are too many ifs and buts. Locating it has proven the hardest thing.

"Despite this I do believe it is there. I'm holding out hope that they still exist."

Grant's comments are not reciprocated throughout the department.

Phil Bradfield is involved in DoC's North Island kokako recovery programme and says the department is split regarding the existence of the South Island bird.

"I personally feel they are extinct. Over the years there should have been some substantial evidence that the bird exists."

Bradfield says much of the bird's diet is no longer as plentiful in the locations it is meant to inhabit.

"Much of the underfloor of the forest has been eaten away over the years. There's just not as much food around."

Nilsson finds it amazing that the department is so adamant the South Island kokako is lost to history.

"The people who classified it extinct have never searched for it."

Buckingham says DoC has put it in the too-hard basket.

"They need to spend time down here and re-evaluate the situation. Not just one week - it could take months."

Nilsson says he and Buckingham went through records of a late 19th century gold mining town in Granville State Forest, in the heart of the West Coast. Throughout that time no one ever recorded sightings of South Island kokako.

"Have we been missing the obvious?" asks Nilsson. "These birds are just naturally mysterious.

"We need to get quality sound recordings. That will make DoC sit up and listen. Time is of the essence.

"I've been searching for this bird for 40 years and I'm not giving up easily.

"You've gotta have hope, hope and some money," says Buckingham.

Staunch in their quest, Nilsson and Buckingham are planning to revisit Fiordland in November.

While the DOC remains unconvinced, there is a chance the last South Island kokakos are still darting about the forest floor in the restless pursuit of food. Their mythical calls echo across the treetops, reminding the forest that they do live on.



GHOST BUSTER: Former DoC officer Ron Nilsson listens for the angelic song of the mythical South Island kokako.

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