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News

# New Zulu lady for Auckland Zoo

By Sarah Mason

PHOTO : AUCKLAND ZOO

STANDING TALL: Ntombi, Auckland Zoo's latest addition, with her mother Kay.

At 1.8m tall and weighing 55kg, Auckland Zoo's newest addition is anything but baby-sized.

On July 25 the first female giraffe born at the zoo in 15 years arrived at the Pridelands enclosure.

The calf, called Ntombi, is the daughter of resident giraffes Kay and Kabulu.

Ntombi means 'lady' in Zulu.

The arrival was a surprise for zookeepers who had become accustomed to 21-year-old Kay giving birth to males over the years.

"She's a great mum and is bonding really well with her calf," says Pridelands team manager Michael Batty.

He says the birth of a female is especially significant as it helps to maintain a viable population of giraffes in the region.

"After Kay's five previous pregnancies all resulting in males, we were hoping she would produce a female."

Batty says staff are happy with her progress and hope to begin her integration into the enclosure soon.

"She's much smaller than male newborns and follows her mum around a lot, but she's very strong and inquisitive.

"We plan on introducing her to her enclosure for one hour a day initially," he says.

"She should be in the enclosure full-time within another month."

He says Ntombi will grow to around 4.5m and 900kg. She is likely to suckle for the next few months much like human babies do, and then be fed fruit and vegetables, Lucerne hay and pellets.

She will share her home with her parents.

Batty says it is uncertain as to whether the giraffe will remain at Auckland Zoo or be transferred elsewhere.

However it would be about a year before Ntombi is old enough.

"She would have to be mature enough to leave her mum, but not so big that she wouldn't be able to travel via the motorways with the overhead bridges."

# Rare seabirds thriving after near extinction

By Stacey Hunt

One of New Zealand's rarest seabirds, once thought to be extinct, is back from the dead and repopulating thanks to conservation initiatives.

The taiko was rediscovered in the 1970s after being considered extinct for 111 years.

Although the species is still critically endangered, the situation is improving.

This year eight taiko chicks hatched and successfully fledged, only three fewer than 2006 which is considered the record breeding season since the species was rediscovered.

The bird is unique to New Zealand and its population is thought to be between 120 and 150.

Found only on the Chatham Islands, and only ever returning from sea to breed, these matchless birds are worth the fight.

The Chatham Islands Taiko Trust, the Department of Conservation (DoC), volunteers and landowners have been working to learn more and bring them back from the brink of extinction, and it seems they are having a positive effect.

Establishing a predator-free area called Sweetwater has been of critical importance

The Chatham Islands Taiko Trust says without continuing work to protect them from predators, the taiko would rapidly become extinct.

It was the predators that forced the birds into near extinction initially, says the trust.

The taiko once bred in large numbers, but with Europeans came predators and within 100 years the bird had all but disappeared.

After 25 years of searching, ornithologist David Crockett hit the jackpot in 1973 when he sighted four birds.

"A lot of people thought that I was looking for ghosts," says Crockett.

But clearly they were wrong, as five years later, on New Year's Day 1978, the first two taiko were caught and released.

Since then their numbers have been increasing.

Having only eight chicks successfully hatch and fledge this year was a little disappointing.

"We were hoping for more this season, so it was a bit of a disappointment," says Chatham Islands DoC worker Antje Leseberg.

Crockett says after fledging the birds will spend four years at sea and will then return to the colony to mooch around and find a partner.

Sweetwater is separate from the Tuku nature reserve where the taiko are currently hatching.

DoC has planned three transfers to move the chicks to Sweetwater, and has so far successfully completed one.

Having this area means the Taiko are safe during the time they spend on land.

"They attach themselves to the area they were brought up in and so now they can come back to a safe predator-free area," says Crockett.

Leseberg says: "If the new site works and the taiko start breeding there, then in five or six years there should be enough birds for a new colony."

There is a danger of something happening to the birds while out at sea, but there is nothing anyone can do to prevent it.

"There is a small proportion, say 10 per cent, that don't make it back to the breeding ground," says Crockett.

He says they hope conservation measures have halted the decline of the taiko, but it is a long-term exercise.

Birds have been tagged with transmitters so they can be monitored when they come and go.

This enables DoC to plot approximately where they are going to land, which allows conservationists to see how they are doing, says Crockett.

Coupled with the predator-free environment, the tracking devices and monitoring should make the situation better.

Crockett says that discovering the taiko have a long life span of approximately 40 years was a nice surprise for the team.

However, they only lay one egg per season and do not breed sucessfully until eight years old, which makes the future for the taiko very hard to predict.