



Left: A takahē, one of New Zealand's rarest native birds. Right: A korimako, or New Zealand bellbird.
Photographer: Carl T. Bergstrom

The Birds I Waited 45 Years to See

An evolutionary biologist returns to New Zealand to find the rare birds he dreamed of seeing as a child making an extraordinary comeback.

By Carl Bergstrom

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A wind from the sea drove droplets of condensing vapor against the gorse-covered hillside. My overshirt was soaked and my glasses frosted with a layer of fine mist. Far below, New Zealand's capital city of Wellington was obscured by the cloudbank from which the country derives its original name: Aotearoa, "land of the long white cloud." My companions, local conservation biologists, were packing away a radio antenna and reining in a dog.

I was holding a four-month-old kiwi.

Although the kiwi is a national icon, few New Zealanders have ever seen one in the wild. That's a shame, because the bird is a remarkable sight. With its long bill, tiny eyes and huge haunches, a grown kiwi looks as if a mad taxidermist had sewn a curlew's bill on a shrew's face and grafted the whole thing to the shaggy back half of a capybara.

For 80 million years before the arrival of humans, New Zealand was a land without terrestrial mammals — by far the largest such landmass anywhere on Earth. Its birds evolved without terrestrial predators, and many lost the capacity for flight. The niches occupied by mammals elsewhere on the planet were wide open: Takahē and kākāpō substituted for rabbits and hares; kiwi, stealthy nocturnal insectivores, took the place of mice and shrews.

Human settlement transformed that ecology. Much of Aotearoa's densely forested wilderness became pastureland, and introduced mammalian predators ravaged native fauna that had evolved without defenses against them. In the span of 700 years, roughly 40% of the endemic bird species went extinct.

But over the past half-century, New Zealand has mounted an extraordinary effort to restore its surviving native bird populations, controlling predators and moving endangered birds into protected sanctuaries. The kiwi in my hands was one small product of that experiment — and evidence of how much has changed since I first came to New Zealand 45 years ago.

Birds of Memory

My family moved to Australia for eight months in 1981. I was 10, and I fell in love with birds. I marveled at the parrots that squawked from the eucalypts and spent school recesses watching plovers hunt worms on the footy pitch. We also visited Aotearoa, where the birds struck me as more mythic than mundane. I read obsessively about its extraordinary species, but they felt no more real or accessible than the 12-foot-tall moa that had gone extinct a millennium ago.

My favorite was the takahē, a giant flightless rail that lumbers through tall grasses like a dinosaur. Takahē are brilliantly colored, with massive red bills and powerful legs, deep blue faces and breasts. Their stubby, shimmering green wings conceal sharp spurs that they wield in territorial disputes.



Carl with his sister and a kangaroo in Australia in 1981. *Source: Bergstrom Family*

In 1981 the chance of seeing one was effectively zero. Fewer than a hundred remained; until 1948 they had been thought extinct. Most lived in remote and off-limits regions of the South Island, and none were in zoos.

So I did what any 10-year-old would do: I pretended. The abundant pūkeko, or Australasian swamphen, shared the takahē's bright colors, if not its shape and demeanor. I imagined that I was a ranger traversing the Murchison mountains and annoyed older birdwatchers by shouting "takahē!" whenever I saw one

Today, New Zealanders don't have to pretend. Wild takahē can be seen in several readily accessible sanctuaries. There are still only about 500 in the world, but the species is on a path to recovery.

Kiwi Country

On a recent journey to seek out Aotearoa's rarest birds, I landed on Rakiura, a remote and almost uninhabited landmass off the southern coast of the South Island. After days of travel from Seattle, a long drive on the wrong side of the road and a white-knuckle flight across the stormy Foveaux Strait in an eight-seater prop plane, I hiked up to my cabin and collapsed, fully dressed, on the bed.

Three hours later, I awoke to otherworldly singing. A glossy black honeyeater with an ascot and lace collar of ornamental white feathers buzzed, beeped, trilled and whistled just outside my window.

My colleague Andrew Digby, a conservation biologist devoted to saving New Zealand's owl-like flightless kākāpō, had suggested a nighttime hike. "It's not uncommon," he wrote, "to bump into kiwi around the roads."

I walked through the rainy twilight toward Ackers Point Lighthouse. Oh, the night sounds! First came the bellbirds and tūi singing until long after dark, then the unfamiliar clicking and humming of summer insects. Finally, feral, frightful shrieks rose from the undergrowth: The raspy screams of a female kiwi seemed to come from a velociraptor, not a bird.



An albatross flies near Rakiura. *Photographer: Carl T. Bergstrom*

Heading up a dark incline, I heard shuffling just a few yards ahead. With my phone display, I cast a dim light forward, and there, almost within touching distance, a southern brown kiwi probed the soft dirt of the trail with its long bill. Oblivious to my presence, it searched around my feet, pushing leaf litter aside. Eventually it bounded uphill into the forest. My words came out as a whisper, unbidden and unconsidered: “I love you, kiwi.” And it was gone.

As a professor of evolutionary biology, I try to help my students appreciate the notion of “deep time” — stretching back hundreds of millions of years. I’ve never been so close to understanding it intuitively as on Rakiura, walking through the ancient tree fern forests beneath the Milky Way.

Aotearoa has been separate from the rest of the world for 80 million years, ever since the underwater continent of Zealandia split off from the supercontinent of Gondwanaland. It was one of the last landmasses reached by humans, but the strange little kiwi has been there the whole time, shuffling through the underbrush beneath the same leafy canopy.

Survival Strategies

Two weeks after visiting Rakiura, I was photographing tiny tailless songbirds known as rifleman in a fenced, predator-free sanctuary in the heart of Wellington. Beyond the edge of my viewfinder, I saw a bright blue bird the size of a turkey striding toward me down the middle of the dirt path. Finally, after 45 years: “Takahē!”

This was a large male known as Bendigo. Higher up in the forest, his hen Waitaa watched warily. Their chick Hiwa peered over her father’s back before striding toward me for a closer look. Bendigo boomed in warning, an infrasonic note that I felt in my chest rather than hearing it with my ears. The chick retreated; I froze.

Eventually, the adults grew bored — I was neither dangerous nor useful. All of this took place in the center of the nation’s capital city.

That encounter was possible because of a conservation strategy pioneered in the 1890s and widely adopted in the 1960s. In most of the world, conservation threats are driven by habitat loss, so responses focus on preservation. But in Aotearoa, introduced predators — rats, stoats, possums, ferrets and feral cats — pose a more urgent threat.

Eradicating these species has been impossible on the mainland, so biologists took a different tack, known as conservation introduction: moving threatened species to sanctuaries and offshore islands where predators can be controlled. The strategy has been hugely successful. Takahē are a South Island species, but all 11 I saw were in North Island preserves. Over the

course of my visit, I saw a dozen of the rarest bird species in the world, something that was not possible 50 years ago.

Yet one cannot declare victory based on such small populations.. Kea, charismatic mountain parrots, have recovered little if at all since I saw them in 1981. Pelagic species are at grave risk from climate change and overfishing. The antipodean albatross and Savlin's albatrosses that soared behind my boat off Rakiura are becoming scarcer. The mainland population of New Zealand's rarest penguin, the hohio, has declined 80% over the past two decades.

Kiwi live 50 years or more, an extraordinarily long lifespan for a small, flightless creature. That longevity is itself a product of New Zealand's unusual evolutionary history.

For tens of millions of years, kiwi had no natural predators other than the now-extinct Haast's eagle. Species facing little risk from predators can afford to invest more energy in survival and less in producing large numbers of offspring. The result for kiwi is what evolutionary biologist call a "slow life-history strategy": They produce just one or two offspring annually but can continue doing so for decades. It worked well for millions of years, until mammalian predators arrived.

A slow life-history strategy is a death sentence for birds under severe predation pressure. But kiwi have one advantage: their large size and powerful legs. Today, their most dangerous predators are stoats. Once kiwi reach about 1.2 kilograms (2.7 pounds), they are considered to have reached "stoat-proof weight," able to use their formidable legs and claws against an attacker.

The Return

On my last morning in the country, [Capital Kiwi Project](#) founder Paul Ward and operations manager Pete Kirkman met me at my hotel. As I settled into the back of their small SUV, I saw that I had company. Ash, a certified kiwi dog, was 75% vizsla, 25% unknown and 100% committed to finding wild kiwi.

We drove through town and into the hills, where the Capital Kiwi Project has spent the past decade working to restore kiwi to the mountains around Wellington. Along the way we met Jeff Hall, a conservation biologist with the sort of wiry frame that only comes from 30 years of tramping through the most remote areas of the country. We parked the trucks and set out into the mist.

Jeff raised his orange radio tracking antenna while Ash bounded about, taut with excitement. Once Jeff had narrowed in with the transmitter, the dog sprinted down a steep hillside and pointed into a low gorse hedge, her entire body quivering. Jeff thrust his arm into the thorns and withdrew a kiwi chick about the size of a small hen.



Jeff Hall with a kiwi bird. *Photographer: Carl T. Bergstrom*

Cradling the bird in one arm, Jeff felt along its body for fat reserves, measured its bill with calipers, then placed it in a special kiwi-weighing sack custom sewn by costume makers at the Royal New Zealand Ballet. Our bird had attained stoat-proof weight in a mere four months, much faster than kiwi do in their usual forest environs.

One possibility, Paul speculated, is that the grazing land where the project releases its birds is a sort of super-habitat: The gorse provides cover, while the open grassland fosters a dense array of worms and other invertebrates to eat.

Measurements complete and the radio tracker removed, Jeff handed me the chick. I threaded the fingers of one hand around its strong legs and tucked its body against mine. The bird was docile in my arms. Its feathers were airy despite the thick mist. Long eyelashlike whiskers surrounded dark and inscrutable eyes. Pressing my face close, it smelled of barnyard dust in the sun.

I slid down the slope toward the gorse bush. It was time to release the chick into a kiwi paradise of abundant food, plentiful cover and no predators large enough to inflict harm. Once free, this bird could thrive in these mountains for longer than any of us in the tracking party will walk this Earth.

Sensing a chance to escape, the bird began to twist in my hands. I lifted it forward and released my grip; its feet started churning the moment they touched the ground. In an instant it vanished into the undergrowth.

“Have a good 50 years, now,” I whispered, “Have a really good 50 years.”

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