

News Release



Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

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Fairy prions returning 'home' to Mana Island

Fairy prions hatched in the Marlborough Sounds have been duped into believing Mana Island is their home.

The first of 240 chicks transferred to the island from Takapourewa (Stephens Island) in the Marlborough Sounds over the past three years has returned, heralding the success of a project to recreate a vibrant ecosystem on the island. It is the first time fairy prions have been successfully transferred to another location. A similar programme to transfer chicks of diving petrels to Mana Island during 1997–99 was also successful.

In the days before they fledged, the eight-week-old fairy prion chicks were hand-fed sardine smoothies by teams of volunteers, under the guidance of a contractor, in the hope they would be tricked into thinking Mana Island was their home.

Their dedication has paid off. The first of the chicks banded in the first transfer in January 2002 was discovered shortly after midnight last Thursday in an artificial burrow on Mana Island, DOC Wellington Conservancy technical support manager Colin Miskelly said.

“We are thrilled to have this first banded chick back and hope there are many more to come over the next three or four years. There has been a huge investment by sponsors and volunteers in the project and to see it working is a real milestone for the island’s restoration.

“It shows that transferring prion chicks to trick them into thinking a new site is their home can work. We didn’t know that up until now. The chicks fledged in good condition but there was a possibility they would go back to Stephens Island.”

So far none of the birds have been seen on Stephens Island.

As well as the returning chick, at least three other prions have been found in burrows or seen flying around the island since September. A sound system playing seabird calls at night on the island has failed to lure any fairy prions back until this year, which Dr Miskelly believes is more than mere coincidence.

“We suspect these ones have been attracted by the returning birds.”

The fairy prion transfer project was funded by Friends of Mana Island (FOMI) through grants and donations, with support from Ngati Koata and Ngati Toa. It is part of a larger restoration programme for the island, which to date has also seen the introduction of takahe, North Island robin, brown teal, diving petrels, yellow-crowned kakariki, speckled and spotted skinks, Wellington green geckos and flax weevils. A wetland has been restored and hundreds of thousands of native trees have been planted by volunteers.

Fairy prions (*titiwainui*, *Pachyptila turtur*) are among New Zealand’s most abundant petrels, and weigh between 100 and 160 grams. They have a blue-grey head and back, a white throat and

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belly, a black M-shaped mark across their wings, and a broad black tip to their tail. They spend most of their lives at sea, and nest in caves or burrows on islands.

Fairy prions are not endangered (there are about a million pairs on Stephens Island), but are no longer present on the Wellington side of Cook Strait. They and other burrowing seabirds are "keystone" species for island ecosystems. Their burrows create safe, sheltered and humid homes for lizards, tuatara and insects. Because they feed at sea and nest in dense colonies, they create highly fertile ecosystems by delivering nutrients in the form of droppings, spilt regurgitations, addled eggs and corpses.

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Caption: The first adult fairy prion captured on Mana Island. Photo, Colin Miskelly, DOC.

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