

Island move gives birds better shot at survival

Threatened bird species gets boost

NEIL RATLEY

Last updated 05:00 08/11/2013

1



BARRY HARCOURT/Fairfax NZ

FLY AWAY: Department of Conservation biodiversity ranger Hannah Edmonds releases mohua (yellowheads) on Resolution Island in Dusky Sound.

A hard-won battle with the weather has enabled the Department of Conservation to strengthen the population of a threatened bird species.

After weeks of waiting on the weather, DOC and the Mohua Charitable Trust were this week able to transfer 22 mohua from the Catlins to Resolution Island in Fiordland.

The birds were captured in Eastern Southland by a team of 20 catchers and flown by helicopter to Dusky Sound. The Catlins mohua will join a population already established on Resolution Island to strengthen the genetic makeup.

Mohua are one of the rarest songbirds in the country and have recently been voted by New Zealanders as bird of the year, in the Forest and Bird's annual poll.

It was hoped Resolution would become a "genetic hotspot" for mohua and other threatened birds.

About 60 mohua were transferred from Landsborough Valley in South Westland in 2011.

DOC Te Anau biodiversity ranger Hannah Edmonds said October was the ideal time to try to capture the birds because they were pairing up and seeking to establish a territory.

"They tend to stay in the one area during this time," she said.

However, it was only on Wednesday, after weeks of waiting, that conditions were perfect for the operation, she said.

The birds are caught using a 9-metre-long net with speakers.

"The speakers emit the calling cry of the mohua and lure the birds in," Ms Edmonds said.

The Catlins Forest holds one of the largest remaining populations of mohua in New Zealand, estimated to be in the low thousands, and would easily support a transfer of 22 individuals, she said.

The addition of the Catlins mohua to the gene pool on Resolution Island would increase numbers and establish the island as a source population for future transfers, Ms Edmonds said.

In one of several false starts, they were forced to release birds caught in the Catlins after strong winds prevented the helicopter from leaving Fiordland.

Resolution was the largest island in Fiordland and, because of ongoing stoat and rat control, it provided a safe haven for rare and threatened species to build up their numbers, Ms Edmonds said.

SAVING A SPECIES

Mohua are small brightly coloured songbirds, distinctive by their bright yellow head and melodic calls.

Mohua were once widespread throughout the beech forests of the South Island, forming large flocks, but are now rated nationally vulnerable and survive only in small pockets of beech forest.

In the 1980s, it was recognised that mohua had disappeared from 75 per cent of their former range and that declines were continuing.

Mohua are particularly vulnerable to predation by stoats and rats in years of high predator numbers.

In October 2011, 60 mohua were transferred to Resolution Island from the Landsborough Valley in South Westland, making the start to establishing a robust population on the island.

Source: Department of Conservation