

Motuihe's Forests Reborn by Stacey Byers

Winter is the best time to plant trees on Motuihe Island because the ground is moist from all the rain. For the past several months, all of our hard work has been leading up to tree planting. We collect seeds by hand from the mature trees on the island and sow them in seed trays back at the nursery. Then we place the seed trays in the sun and water them often. We grow about twenty species of trees and shrubs in the nursery to reflect the natural mixture of the beautiful forest which once covered the entire island.



Over the years Motuihe Island has been used for a variety of purposes. The three points of the island each served as a Maori pa for tribes living in the Auckland area. Since the points are surrounded by water on three sides they were easily defended. Maori later sold the island to Europeans who used it to graze sheep and cattle. The island was eventually sold to the New Zealand government who used it at various times as a quarantine station, children's health camp, naval base, and farm – today it's a Department of Conservation recreation reserve.

On Motuihe Island we are surrounded by the bush, songs of native birds, and water lapping along the beaches. Looking out over the water we can see Auckland on the horizon, yet the island is tranquil and peaceful compared to the rush and buzz of the city. Here we can help mother-nature along as we learn to identify pohutakawa, mahoe, kawakawa, manuka, puriri, whau, and karamu seedlings and sift the rich earth through our fingers.



A lot of hands certainly make light work. Forty of us were able to plant 1,000 trees in just two hours. Looking back over the hill slope and stream area at Snapper Bay, we could see saplings poking up from the grassy field. It's actually quite good to nestle the trees in the long grass because it protects them from the salt spray and tricks the curious pukeko. These birds watch where we plant and then once we've left they will pull the trees out and nibble the roots, searching for insects. If a pukeko rips up a sapling, the tree will dry up and die along with all of our hard work. Once the trees establish themselves and grow long roots, they push up through the long grass in about a year's time. Eventually the trees shade out the grass and a forest is born.



The saddleback, an endangered bird species, has been re-introduced to the island. These friendly birds never fail to visit us when we hike through the mature forest remnants they call home. We are treated to distinctive songs and showy brown saddles draped across the birds' backs as they flit from branch to branch. Careful monitoring has shown that the Motuihe

Island saddle backs have increased in numbers from twenty to thirty during two years time.

During afternoons we often search for and pull out weeds such as moth plant - a



flowering vine originally from South America which was first planted here in the 1880's. Conditions in New Zealand allow these vines to grow prolifically – these plants climb to the top of tall trees, smothering entire forests. Moth plant is generally easy to spot in the winter because it has many large seed pods – about the size of a choko. Each pod contains about 700 milkweed-like seeds. We've done a good job in reducing moth plant on Motuihe Island, but it is difficult for me to walk through the city of Auckland. I see moth plant growing in neighbour's gardens, and

along roads and bridges. The pods are ready to burst and disperse their wind-blown seeds towards Motuihe where this fast-growing vine can re-invade the island.

What will the forests of Motuihe Island look like in a thousand year's time? I imagine that by planting early-colonizing tree species and ridding the island of weeds, mother-nature will take over from where we left off. Already trees planted four years ago are several meters high and are producing abundant amounts of seed to ensure the survival of the next generation. In areas where heavy moth plant infestations have been removed trees have re-colonized with no human help.



In the future the forest will abound with an even greater diversity of birdsong. The rich leaf litter will provide a food source for numerous insect species which nocturnal kiwi birds will be more than happy to devour. The kakariki will grace the canopy with its beautiful red crown as it feeds on seeds, fruit, buds, and nectar. At dawn and dusk the loud and melodic notes of the bellbird will ring out across the island. Kauri trees, giants of the forest, will dot the landscape and tower over broadleaf species. Their branches and crevices will be heavy with epiphytes that have found a perfect home.