



New home: Motuihe Island.

Photos: HEATHER McCracken

# Birds return to island after 100-year absence

By HEATHER McCracken

The sound of the saddleback can be heard again on Motuihe Island after an absence of 100 years.

Twenty saddlebacks, or tieke, have been released in what is hoped will be the first of several native bird transfers.

The birds were captured on Tiritiri Matangi and released in a small section of native bush on Motuihe.

The release was planned by the Motuihe Trust with support from the Conservation Department.

Trust chairman John Laurence says it's one step towards restoring the island's natural environment.

"Just 15km from downtown Auckland people will be able to see and hear birds that disappeared from the mainland about a century ago," he says.

The saddleback had almost disappeared by 1900 because of introduced predators such as cats, rats and stoats.

By the 1960s there was only a single remaining population of the North Island sub-species, on Hen Island off Whangarei.

The birds are now found on 12 predator-free islands, including a population of more than 400 on Tiritiri Matangi.

Mr Laurence says they are expected to flourish on Motuihe as well.

The island has been declared pest free after a two-year programme to eradicate pests, including rabbits and wild cats.

"Everybody is very confident the saddleback will do well. There's tonnes of food and places for them to live," he says.



**Homeward bound:** A saddleback in an aviary on Tiritiri Matangi before transfer to Motuihe.

Photo: LOUISE COTTERALL

The birds like to roost and nest in holes in the ground. Roosting boxes have been made by students from Epsom Girls Grammar and scattered on the island.

The Motuihe Trust has been cultivating native plants, clearing weeds and planting trees for the past two years.

More than 4000 volunteers have given up weekends to work in the nursery, collect seeds and pull weeds.

In the first year 6000 seedlings were planted. Last year volunteers planted 23,000, which is expected to be repeated this year.

"Next year we'll aim for 30,000," Mr Laurence says.

The trust also has permission to release red-crowned kakariki and kiwi, after a ranger is permanently on site.

The ranger is needed to protect the birds from predators brought by boats.

"Kiwi are prone to being chased by dogs, so if anyone brings a dog on the island the kiwi will be at risk."

In 10 years, Mr Laurence says Motuihe will be an authentic natural environment of forest, wetland and beaches.

"There'll be a track network that'll take people to different sites. They'll walk through a bush track with native plants and all kinds of native birds and animals to listen to and see.

"There'll be a track to a wetland area with different types of plants and birds, and another track to the foreshore where there are shore birds nesting."

Plans for the restoration also include a visitor centre, cafe and museum.

To become involved as a volunteer with the Motuihe Trust, phone: 0800-668-844, or visit [www.motuihe.org.nz](http://www.motuihe.org.nz).



**Just looking:** Two saddlebacks take a peek at their new home on Motuihe Island.



**Arrival:** Birds are carried on to the island in transport boxes.