



Daydream believers relive good old days

WHERE would we be without the dreamers? On Saturday morning, 91-year-old conservation pioneer Jim Holdaway hiked up the spine of Motuihe Island and released one of four kakariki — the red-crowned parakeet — helicoptered in from Little Barrier Island.

He was surrounded in the little grove of remnant coastal forest by fellow dreamers who listened to stories of the days before stoats and rats and mice and men, when great flocks of these cute parrots chattered about every part of New Zealand.

Massey University conservationist Luis Ortiz-Catedral, who is overseeing the translocation, says that once established on Motuihe, they might hop across to other islands and one day even pop up 15km away in downtown Auckland's Albert Park.

As the speechifying went on, a glance back to the Sky Tower, shimmering up the harbour in the still autumn sunlight, was enough to make it all seem possible. All around us, the rapid transformation of 179 hectare Motuihe Island was proof of the power of dreams.

Free of rats and mice since 1996 and of rabbits from 2004, the island is rapidly being transformed from farmland to an authentic natural environment. A sign dated 2004 greets you at the start of a track of already head-high flowering manuka and assorted other natives.

In just five years, volunteers under the guidance of John Laurence and the Motuihe Trust have planted more than 140,000 trees and shrubs. In 2003 they



RELOCATION: Motuihe is ideal for kakariki.

PICTURE / HAWKE'S BAY TODAY

planted 6500, last year the number was 47,000. All come from seed collected on the island and grown in the trust's nursery.

We were there on false pretences. The invite had said a flock of 50 birds was to be liberated. But on arrival we learned that there'd been a "pre-release" of around 30 birds on Wednesday. The stress of being caught in nests back on Little Barrier had been a bit much for some, and it was decided rather than keep them in the aviary for a week, it was best to let them go sooner.

However friendly and curious they normally are, the pre-releasers did not rush to greet us on Saturday. With a new

island to explore, they probably had better things to do.

I must admit my knowledge of this giant native budgie was rather slim until now. Apparently it was as ubiquitous as the house sparrow and then some throughout New Zealand until rats and stoats and other introduced predators rapidly cleaned them out. Even their ability to lay up to nine eggs a clutch was no defence.

A quick Google reveals that while unknown to most of us at home, kakariki are popular cage birds, both amongst licensed breeders here, and collectors around the world, including Israel, Belgium, United Kingdom,

Holland and Australia. They even have their own web site, where enthusiasts swap notes about the antics of their favourite "kaks" and "kikes."

Indeed, if they could lose their unfortunate nicknames, they sound rather a more fun national bird to be named after than the boring, nocturnal, worm-grubbing kiwi.

"Hi, could anyone tell me what signs I will see when my kaki's want to flirt with each other. The female has already had eggs in the past and when she is in full love mood cocks her bottom in the air, wings start flapping, throws her head back and makes a lot of noise. Well what I want to know is what to expect from the male."

The reply: "Initially the male often places a foot on her back, sort of a hug, flashes his iris, feeds her and makes little tweeting sounds."

Now what Kiwi bloke couldn't identify with that endearing exchange.

On a more basic level, Tontana says his/her "sweet little kakariki eat using their feet" but wonders whether it is normal. Fellow fanciers reassure him it is.

However, the rat trap on the shore line just beyond the wharf is a reminder of how unsafe the New Zealand environment can be for them. Just last month an early warning device picked up a stray rat on Motuihe which was quickly tracked down by a detection dog.

Luckily, it seems to be a loner. Swum across from nearby Motutapu perhaps? DNA testing is underway to try and find out.