

# Saddleback or Tieke

## *(Philesturnus carunculatus)*

**Saddlebacks** were formerly numerous, but they had gone from much of the country by 1900. This was mainly due to predation by introduced rats, cats and mustelids. By the 1960s only two small populations remained, on Hen (Taranga) Island off Whangarei and on the Big South Cape Islands off Stewart Island. Wildlife managers at the time knew that saddlebacks were vulnerable, and there were several early unsuccessful attempts to establish them on other islands. During the 1960s, the technique of island saddleback transfers was perfected. This came just in time for the South Island saddleback, because in 1964, ship rats invaded their last refuge on the Big South Cape Islands. The transfer of 36 birds to two nearby rat-free islands saved the South Island saddleback. Today, North Island saddlebacks occur on 12 islands and at Karori Wildlife Sanctuary and number over 6000. The South Island saddleback now occurs on 16 islands and numbers about 1300 birds.



*North Island saddleback (photo: Peter Daniel)*

Saddlebacks evolved in an environment lacking mammalian predators, so they do not recognise them as a danger. They often feed on the ground, where they fall easy prey to cats and stoats. Probably more importantly however, they nest and roost in holes. If there are no tree holes, they nest and roost on the ground, where they are easy prey for rats. Since saddlebacks nest and roost in holes, they readily use nest and roost boxes, and boxes are being provided for them on Motuihe.

Saddlebacks usually lay 2-3 eggs. The female incubates the eggs for 18 days and the young spend a further 25-27 days in the nest before they fledge. The male helps the female to feed the nestlings, and fledged young are fed by both parents for 1-2 months before they become independent.

Saddlebacks have fascinating song behaviour. Territorial songs include loud chatter songs in which pairs often duet together. Males also sing up to 5 different song dialects, which are learned from neighbours. These distinctive songs are spaced around the habitat forming song dialect areas.

During territorial displays, saddlebacks call and display in highly ritualised interactions called bow-fan-warble assemblies. Opponents bow and fan their tails and display their enlarged red wattles and bright chestnut saddle markings, while giving soft aggressive calls. Paired birds often courtship feed and give soft, musical pair reinforcement calls. Saddlebacks form life long pair bonds, and territorial birds usually remain in the same territory for their entire lives. Like many NZ forest birds, saddlebacks are very long lived. Ten year life spans are not unusual, and one bird on Tiritiri Island lived for over 20 years.

*Tim Lovegrove*



*Photo by Peter Craw*

# MOTUIHE ISLAND is being restored with native trees and bird song

*Motuihe Island has an area of 179 hectares and is situated in the Waitemata Harbour only 30 minutes from downtown Auckland. Its stunning beaches and sheltered bays have made it a popular day trip for visitors.*



## IN THE PAST

The island has had a long history of Maori settlement which has left visible evidence of fortified pa and living areas, prior to European occupation. The European history includes farming, human quarantine site, prisoner of war camp, children's health camp, naval training base and recently as a Department of Conservation-managed recreation reserve.

## PRESENT INITIATIVES

The Motuihe Trust was formed to restore Motuihe Island with the vision that Motuihe Island will be a natural environment of indigenous flora and fauna together with identified significant historic sites, offering a quality recreational, environmental, and educational experience to visitors. Visitors to the island will be able to see native birds in their native habitat, encouraged to walk around the island and learn about conservation of the Hauraki Gulf.

The restoration, enhancement, and protection of the indigenous flora and fauna and the significant historical sites will be undertaken by community volunteers in partnership with the Department of Conservation, iwi, and wider community.

The Motuihe Restoration Plan prepared by the Motuihe Trust and approved by the Department of Conservation following extensive community consultation provides for significant restoration. Approximately 80% of the land will be planted in eco-sourced native trees and plants while preserving the expansive views from the ridgelines. A network of themed tracks will take visitors from a substantial planned Visitor Centre to different areas of interest including the long white sandy beaches, fortified pa site, wetlands, biodiversity area, existing coastal forest remnants, and cultural historic sites. The Restoration Plan includes controlling environmentally damaging plants, removing non-historic non-native trees, translocating rare and endangered fauna and flora, and providing effective biosecurity measures to protect the island's animal pest-free status.

## YOU CAN BE INVOLVED

The community is encouraged to participate in all aspects of the restoration programme. There are opportunities for experts and novices in the community who share a common interest in conservation to be involved with the recreational, environmental, and educational aspects of Motuihe Project, whether as part of scientific study, ecotourism, heritage conservation, love of nature, or community spirit.

Since the start of 2003 to mid 2005 volunteers have established a nursery on the island and grown and planted approximately 50,000 plants, all from seeds collected on Motuihe.



Volunteers have commenced an island wide programme of controlling environmentally damaging non native plants and trees. The themed track network has been pegged out. Bait and monitoring stations have been laid to prevent introduction of animal pests and a programme of public awareness regarding no dogs or cats allowed on Motuihe Island has been commenced.

## THE FUTURE

Motuihe Island will soon be transformed back to an authentic natural environment of beaches, native forests, open spaces with sounds of saddleback, bellbird and kokako all around and will be a place of natural and cultural heritage which locals and visitors will be pleased to experience and will be a fine example of what can be achieved by the community for the community.

## BE PART OF THE VISION

If you would like to volunteer your time as an individual, group, company or donate goods and services please contact Motuihe Project on or telephone 0800 668844 or refer to [www.motuihe.org.nz](http://www.motuihe.org.nz)

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