

Mokomoko Newsletter

Number 24, June 2026

Kia ora everyone. it's been another fantastic year at Mokomoko Dryland Sanctuary. Here's a few pieces of news.

Otago green skinks:

Our newest arrivals, the 61 Otago green skinks that were translocated into the sanctuary in December 2024, are proving just as cryptic as expected! They like the damp gullies, and will bask partly hidden in vegetation. However, we're finally starting to see a few, and we're thrilled to have spotted eight new babies. They seem particularly fond of a stick pile with pohuehue/*Muehlenbeckia* growing through it. Getting ID photos is challenging, see photo below.



Spot the baby green skink! (Hint: This one's not very green)

Otago skinks:

Otago skinks were released in 2018 and their numbers are climbing strongly (see graphs below). Sixteen new babies were seen last year, making a total of 78 born in the sanctuary that we know of. They're reasonably secretive animals, so some aren't spotted until they reach adult size



DOC survey team Jo Corrie, Byron Radford, Carey Knox, Grant Norbury and Gordon Rayner Oct 2025. AY

at age four. Sometimes adults also elude us for a year or two before reappearing. The Otago skinks still don't seem in a hurry to leave the well-populated rocks they were raised on, and only the odd one is seen roaming to other outcrops.

Grand skinks:

A trek up to Rock 7 (which we call 'Grand Central') is almost always rewarded with sightings of the active grand skinks, which are often seen stalking insects or chasing each other. A total of 73 baby grand skinks have now been spotted in the sanctuary. The number of founding animals appears to be dropping as they die of old age, with only one founder seen in the last six months. They're not as long-lived as Otago skinks so this isn't surprising. They've done a wonderful job of getting the first generation of sanctuary born animals going, so cheers to them!



One of the founding female grand skinks, Og045. AY



Newborn grand skink at Rock 7. AY

Conservation status change:

The conservation status of both grand and Otago skinks has improved from ‘Threatened – Nationally Endangered’ to ‘Threatened – Nationally Increasing’. This is great news, and is attributed to conservation efforts at Macraes for eastern animals, and at Mokomoko Dryland Sanctuary for western animals, as well as the continued existence of some populations in the wild.



Two sanctuary-born Otago skinks bask together. Sep 2025. AY

Jewelled geckos:

Fifty four of the 84 founding jewelled geckos released in 2018 have now been seen, and 47 babies. They’re remaining difficult to survey, due to the increasingly high, complex tangles of *Coprosma*, *Muehlenbeckia*, matagouri and bush lawyer in the gullies. These tangles are dream real estate for jewelled geckos,

replete with flies, flowers, berries and leafy camouflage, but they’re a real challenge to survey. Carey Knox’s drone has helped find a few. Recently a founder was sighted that had stayed hidden for the last eight years!

The little guys:

Over summer Anna and Grant repeated population counts of schist geckos, McCann’s skinks, and southern grass skinks both inside and outside the sanctuary. Previous counts were made in 2014 before the fence was built, and in 2020, so we’re able to see how these pre-existing species have responded to being in a mammal-free sanctuary.



Anna and her dad Richard Gray checking gecko retreats March 2026. Photo Helen Gray

Preliminary results show that the number of schist geckos found in Onduline retreats inside the sanctuary have increased nearly 8-fold since 2014, compared with only marginal changes outside the fence. Tracking rates of geckos and skinks, and sightings of skinks along transects, have also increased substantially. See graphs below. On one of the survey sessions inside the sanctuary we checked 96 Onduline retreats before we found one that didn’t



How many schist geckos here?! Some are marked with silver pen. You can also see pieces of discarded skin and droppings. GN



Delegates from the Australian Wildlife Management Society conference visit the sanctuary Dec 2025.

have a gecko in it! The busiest had 17 geckos. A big thank you to Central Lakes Trust, Otago Community Trust and the Sargood Bequest Trust for funding this hugely encouraging research. It clearly shows that small relatively common lizard species can benefit greatly from the absence of predatory mammals.

Visitors:

In the last year we've enjoyed visits from Whakatipu Wildlife Trust, Whakatipu Reforestation Trust, Southern Lakes Sanctuary, E3 Environmental Consultants, local children with Enviroschools, ORC

Biodiversity Forum, Australasian Wildlife Management Society and a number of private groups. It's wonderful to see people enjoying our native lizards in ways they may not have before.

Research:

University of Otago Masters student Ryan Sullivan is studying the social behaviour of schist geckos at the sanctuary. By regularly checking clusters of Onduline retreats, he's been recording the groups the geckos congregate in, and how stable these are over time. He's also using genetics to determine family relationships. We'll be fascinated to hear what he finds.



Mary, Gordy and Otis Rayner and Grant Norbury inspect tracking cards. AY



Two young visitors show full commitment to photographing a grand skink. AY



Stephanie Godfrey, Ryan Sullivan and Kaleb Latu at work. AY

No mice!

We're over the moon to have clocked up four years mouse-free and counting! Anna continues regular checks and happily reports no sign of the hungry munchers. Woohoo!

A great film:

A big thank you to film maker Ellie Adams who produced a beautiful short film about Mokomoko Dryland Sanctuary, premiered at the NZ Mountain Film Festival in 2025. Films like this help raise public awareness about lizard conservation needs. You can watch Ellie's film here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1I03RhS7FWeKiSr4sfR_UAePY9iLsYSH4/view?usp=drive_link



Above: Visitors enjoying 'Grand Central'. Below: As the native vegetation increases in the gully, pīwakawaka are a common sight.



Thank you:

A big thank you to our amazing volunteers who check the fence every month, and to those who come out and help spray briar and everlasting pea. It makes such a difference. We're also thankful for the generosity of our financial supporters. We appreciate recent support from the Jones Long Family, Central Lakes Trust, Transpower, Sargood Bequest Trust, Otago Community Trust, ORC Ecofund, Laura and Henry Roe and Earnsclough Station.

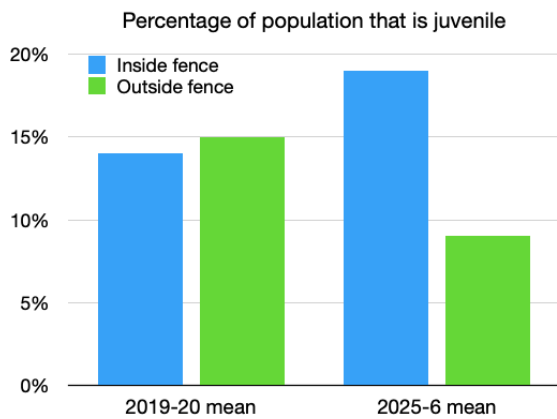
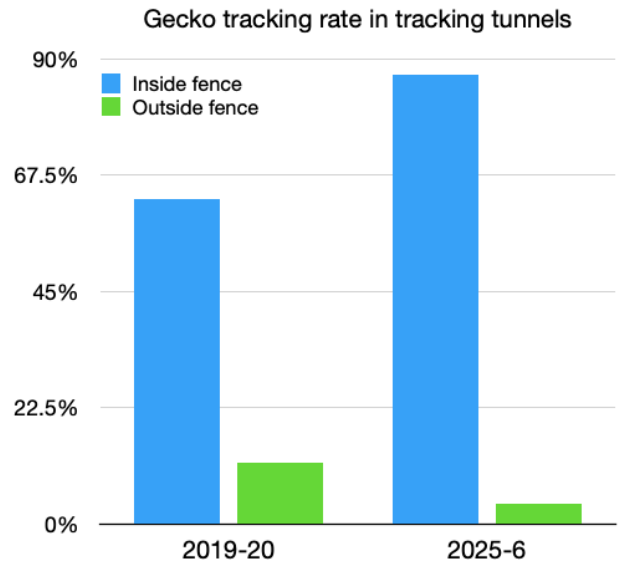
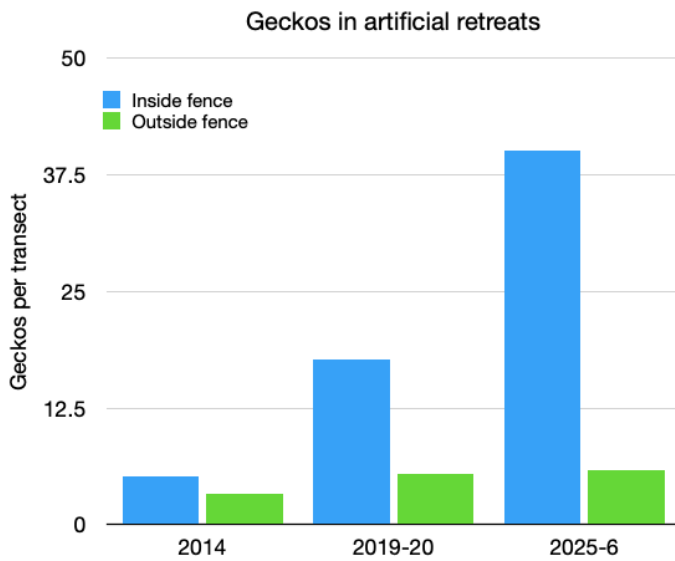
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Trustees of the Central Otago Ecological Trust



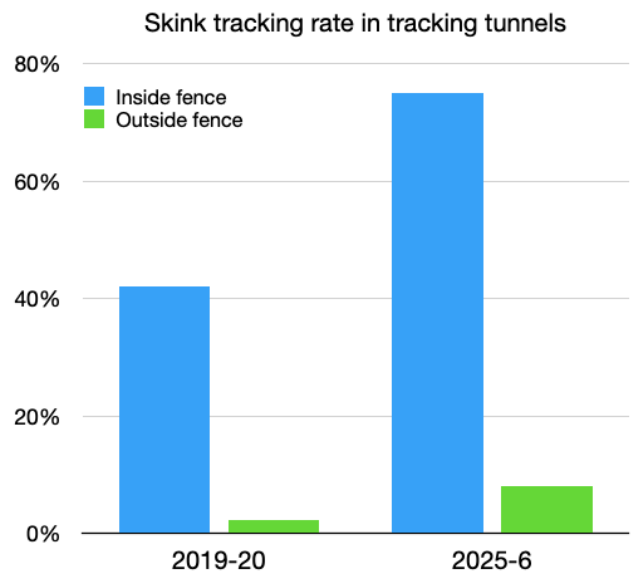
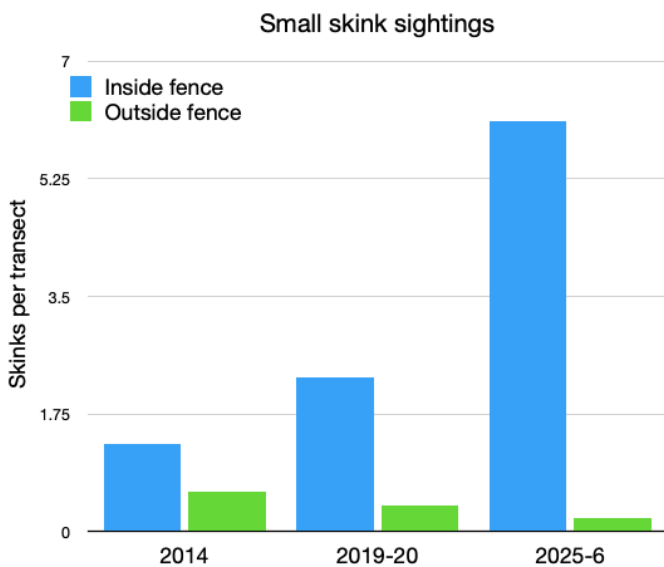
A young jewelled gecko. April 2026. AY

Schist geckos



Schist gecko in *Coprosma propinqua* at night. Carey Knox

Southern grass skinks and McCann's skinks



Grand and Otago skinks

