

Mokomoko Newsletter

Number 17, May 2020

Hello everyone,

Wonderful events have taken place at Mokomoko Dryland Sanctuary over the summer in the form of the birth of the first grand and Otago skink babies. Seeing the population begin breeding is a major milestone and a very encouraging indicator. So far three baby grand skinks and three baby Otago skinks have been spotted, which suggests there are a number more happily hidden away in the tangle of bluffs and vegetation, as they are generally even more elusive than their parents.



A newborn grand skink enjoys some sun, April 2020

Still more elusive are the jewelled geckos that were translocated into the gully in March 2018, and are proving to be nigh-impossible to see by anyone except Carey Knox (Wildlands Consultants). In his monitoring at Mokomoko last year, Carey found eight jewelled gecko babies (along with 36 of the original adults) and all the females he found were pregnant, which suggests the gully is somewhat alive with 40mm long bright green sprogs, all perfectly camouflaged in the long grass and *Coprosma*.



Newborn jewelled gecko. Photo (and thumb): Carey Knox

Fully independent from birth, these baby jewelled gecko, as well as the baby grand and Otago skinks, will be catching the odd insect, enjoying the berries of the native shrubs *Corokia* and *Melicytus*, and learning to find refuges in the outcrops and vegetation. And along with the adults, as winter comes, they will spend more time in their thermal refuges, and only emerge to bask on the warmest of winter days.



A young Otago skink, March 2020. Photo: A. Banks

Skink monitoring update

As well as the sighting of newborns, reasonable numbers of adult grand and Otago skinks have continued to be sighted through the summer and autumn. Grant Norbury, Alistair Banks and Anna Yeoman have been a core team of regular observers in recent months. Nevertheless, to date we've never seen

22 of 42 Otagos released, and never seen 10 of 31 grands released. This is not unexpected given that some individuals are much harder to detect than others, and the fact that some skinks will have perished (three found so far). So in a nutshell, things are going quite well.

Otago skink release

In December, six more juvenile Otago skinks were released into Mokomoko Dryland Sanctuary. These individuals were at Kiwi Park in Queenstown, but had not been doing well in captivity, so the decision was made by DOC to release them into Mokomoko.



Sasha Roselli and John Keene (DOC) along with Kiwi Park staff and COET volunteers release juvenile Otago skinks.

The World Congress of Herpetology (WCH9) was held in Dunedin this year. Grant Norbury presented on COET's experiences in establishing a community sanctuary. It was wonderful to see the interest and enthusiasm within conservation circles for what has been achieved so far with Mokomoko Dryland Sanctuary. Trustee Jan Kelly presented observations from her 10-year study of McCann's skinks in her Wanaka garden. Jan knows the identity of over 200 skinks based on their unique body markings, so she knows who are dominant, submissive, cheeky, mobile, old, young and so on. The audience was amazed at the incredibly detailed behaviours observed by Jan. Her work will expand our understanding of how lizards behave and interact with one another.

Lions visit

In February, a group of the Alexandra Lions Club visited Mokomoko Dryland Sanctuary, and following the visit the Lions Club put on a hearty BBQ at Conroys Dam for COET trustees and volunteers - thank you Lions!



Young and old enjoying the chance to see the lie of the land and get close to a few Otago skinks during the Lions visit Feb 2020.



Gordon Rayner, Anna Yeoman, Jan Kelly and Grant Norbury at the WCH9 following Jan's presentation.



Coprosma propinqua at Mokomoko. Feb 2020.

Learning to look

Through the summer the regenerating native shrubs at Mokomoko have put on their subtle but gorgeous show. As summer progressed the yellow star-shaped flowers on the *Corokia* were replaced by the deep orange and red of its abundant berries. The *Coprosmas* joined in with fruit ranging from white to midnight blue, while the *Melicytus* kept its snowy white berries exclusively for the lizards under its protective armour of porcupine spikes. A large range of invertebrates will also be enjoying the shelter and food provided by the regenerating natives at Mokomoko. In true drylands style, a lot of what's going on at Mokomoko is not large or flashy, and requires some effort to discover its secrets. And for those who are lucky enough to spend some time there, it is proving to be a place of serenity and delight.

DESERTS, FOR INSTANCE

The loveliest places of all
are those that look as if
there's nothing there
to those still learning to look.

Brian Turner



Beetles enjoy the matagouri in flower. Mokomoko Dryland Sanctuary Nov 2020.

Research

Over summer, Masters student, Sam Turner, has been monitoring abundance of common schist geckos inside and outside the fence. Her work, and those of interns before her, have shown geckos have increased 5-fold inside the fence compared to low stable numbers outside. This suggests that even apparently 'common' species, like schist geckos, are suppressed by introduced predatory mammals. Like most geckos, this species is an avid consumer of native berries, thereby helping to disperse seeds. This is an important ecosystem service that introduced predators are limiting.

New website

In March the new Mokomoko Dryland Sanctuary website was finished by COET's science communication intern Anna Yeoman. Take a look at www.mokomokosanctuary.com. And if you haven't already, you can see a short film about Mokomoko's work "Keeping a Community Sanctuary".

Work

COET volunteers have helped on a few working evenings with weed spraying (everlasting pea), fence checks and mouse bait retrieval. As always, COET is incredibly thankful for the involvement, enthusiasm and efforts of its volunteers. And for the generosity of its supporters who make this work possible.

Trustees of the Central Otago Ecological Trust



Newborn grand skink. April 2020.