

Mokomoko Newsletter

Number 23, May 2025



Central Otago Ecological Trust
A Community-led Conservation Project

Kia ora koutou,

It's been another wonderful year at Mokomoko Dryland Sanctuary. Here are a few things we'd like to share.

The Trust celebrates 20 years

In March this year, the clock ticked over 20 years since the Central Otago Ecological Trust was founded! To celebrate, trustees and volunteers spent a morning together at the sanctuary, enjoying good food and drink, reminiscing, and lizard spotting.

Here's a short photo film to celebrate the last two decades: [COET 20 Years](#)

Highlights:

2005: COET was founded.

2009: The 0.3 hectare 'pilot study' fence was built.

2011: Mice got into the small fence, leading to important learnings about the dangers mice pose even to large lizards.

2015: The 14 hectare fence was completed.

2018: Jewelled geckos, grand skinks and Otago skinks were introduced.

2020: Newborns of all three introduced species were sighted.

Numbers of pre-existing lizard species (McCann's skinks, southern grass skinks, and schist geckos) doubled.

2023: Otago green skinks were introduced.

2024: Tally of grand and Otago skink newborns tops 100.



Cakes and bubbles to mark the occasion. GN

Grand and Otago skinks

The grand and Otago skink populations at the sanctuary continue to grow. We've now spotted 62 young grand skinks and 64 young Otago skinks born within the fence. Interestingly, both species continue to show little inclination to spread from their release rocks to other rock tors in the sanctuary, with the vast majority of grand skinks still being seen on Rock 7, and Otago skinks on Rocks 13 and 15. During the annual DOC survey in October 2024, led by Joanne Corrie from DOC Alexandra, good numbers of both species were seen.



Newborn Otago skink. April 2025. AY



COET trustees and volunteers enjoy watching the grand skinks during the 20th anniversary visit. AY

Jewelled geckos

The jewelled geckos have received little survey attention in the last year, but like previous surveys, they are presumably continuing to live and multiply in beautiful obscurity in the dense gully!

Green skinks

Our newest arrivals, 61 Otago green skinks from the Hawkdun Range, were released in the gully in December 2023. We were warned they'd be difficult to spot, and so they have proven to be. They spend most of their time on the ground amongst grass and shrubs, and bask 'cryptically' – meaning well-hidden. In preparation for their introduction, we put out 100 artificial retreats made of Onduline, but with so much natural habitat available for them, they may not be needing to use these. There have been sightings of at least four adults so far, and excitingly, in March this year, one baby was spotted.

Small lizards

The smaller lizard species contribute to the increasingly lively feel of the sanctuary. On warm days, the long grass in the gully is alive with southern grass skinks, and McCann's skinks are seen in the thyme on the hillsides,



Three schist geckos enjoy an Onduline retreat, complete with tasty slaters. March 2025. AY

and on the rocks. Schist geckos sometimes make their presence known by chirping (an alarm call) from rock cracks as they are approached, and are commonly seen in the artificial retreats.

Research

Mokomoko Dryland Sanctuary continues to function as a research site. University of Otago Masters student, Angus Davis, took genetic samples from the tail tips of 15 Otago skinks, to help understand their relationship to scree skinks – another large, rock-dwelling skink that



A sub-adult Otago skink partially concealed in *Muehlenbeckia*. AY

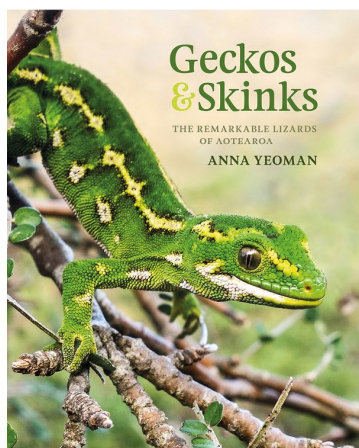
lives in the South Island drylands. During his research he also found six new Otago skinks that we hadn't seen! Carey Knox is completing a PhD on the use of drones to find and monitor lizards, and carried out early comparisons of search efficiency at the sanctuary. Tom Reeves, after trialling a tunnel design for collecting eDNA from Otago skinks at Mokomoko in 2023, went on to use the technique successfully in the wild in the Awa Nohoaka Conservation Area near Wanaka.

Mice

The last mouse incursion was in May 2022. Anna has been doing monthly checks and we're thrilled to announce there's still no sign of mice inside the sanctuary, making it nearly three years of being mouse-free!

Book

In October 2024, trustee Anna Yeoman released her book, *Geckos & Skinks: The Remarkable Lizards of Aotearoa* (publ. Potton & Burton) which tells the stories of lizard discovery, research and conservation in New Zealand, accompanied by beautiful photographs by herpetologists. The book launch in Alexandra was well attended, and Anna continues to spread the word about NZ's lizards through speaking engagements.



Guests at the *Geckos & Skinks* book launch, Oct 2025. AY



At the sanctuary following the book launch. Photo Lan Pham.

Award

In August 2024, Grant Norbury was awarded the Caughley Medal, the highest honour bestowed by the Australasian Wildlife Management Society. His research career on predator-prey interactions in dryland ecosystems is celebrated as both academically rigorous and focused on finding practical outcomes, and his generous mentoring of others is recognised. The nomination also includes an acknowledgment of Mokomoko Dryland Sanctuary as, "one of the most critical sites nationally for conservation of Aotearoa's most threatened and endangered skink and gecko species."

Thank you

The trust would like to thank its volunteers for their valuable help with weed control and regular fence checks at the sanctuary. Your willingness and enthusiasm make the work a

pleasure. We're also grateful for recent support from the Jones Long Family, Laura & Henry Roe, Earnscleugh Station, Central Lakes Trust, Otago Community Trust, and Otago Regional Council.

Trustees of the Central Otago Ecological Trust



This two-year-old Otago skink was first seen during the DOC survey in November 2024, 200m away from the nearest release rock. AY



Marieke Lettink introduces the next generation to a jewelled gecko, Mokomoko, October 2024. GN



James Reardon and Grant Norbury at the sanctuary, Mar 2025. AY



Juvenile grand skink, April 2025. AY



COET trustees and volunteers toast two decades of work. March 2025. Photo James Reardon