

Project Halo – predator control for native bird recovery in rural and urban areas

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Abstract

Project Halo's aim is to assist in habitat restoration and biodiversity. Within its initial years the focus was on increasing sightings of Tui within urban areas of Hamilton city. The reason initial an effort focussed on this species was because a viable breeding population was known to exist within a 20 kilometre winter feeding range of the bird. Research had shown that Tui, a nectarivorous species, do not need 'corridors' unlike other wildlife and they are known to commute into the city to feed on abundant exotic plants and, more increasingly with the assistance of volunteer groups, native plant species.

Keywords: habitat restoration, multi-agency approach, predator control

Introduction

An intensive predator control programme was initiated in 2007 to facilitate the re-introduction of endemic song bird species back into Hamilton city. Named the Hamilton Halo Project (Project Halo), it was initiated by Waikato Regional Council's Biosecurity-Heritage Group and is aimed at bringing iconic native bird species, such as the Tui, Bellbird and Kereru back into the urban areas of Hamilton city. These three species are both important pollinators and dispersers of native plants, and highly valued by residents of the city for their bird song and theatrics. Recent studies had shown that tui nest success was only 27 percent, mostly due to high populations of ship rats in the Waikato. To increase the number of Tui visiting the city, summer breeding success needed to be enhanced within the 20 kilometre feeding range around Hamilton city.

Methodology

In conjunction with the project's strategic partners – the Department of Conservation and Landcare Research – seven sites within a 20 km radius of Hamilton City were initially identified as being known tui nesting sites and ear-marked to receive intensive rat, possum and mustelid control. The control programme for these sites sees them receiving three year's predator control over a five year cycle. In 2009/10 six of the seven Halo sites, totalling 1,024 hectares, were controlled and achieved less than 5% rat tracking index over the bird nesting period. In addition to the intensive control being undertaken, other organisations and volunteer groups have undertaken planting of native trees over many years which assists in providing the Tui with an increased food source within Hamilton City.

Discussion

Project Halo has been undertaking intensive predator control for a total of five years. The success of the control has been dramatic in terms of both nesting success, sightings in the city and in public enthusiasm and support. The public have been very proactive in contacting the Council with Tui sightings in and around Hamilton City. Public enthusiasm and support has been aided with Project Halo launching a social networking campaign in October 2009 by way of Facebook and Twitter. A recent survey was undertaken with 39% of the sites' active monthly users responding with positive feedback supporting the objectives of Project Halo.

The successful reduction of predators at breeding sites, through intensive control, led to Waikato Regional Council collaborating with Landcare Research and the University of Waikato in the release of 50 bellbirds at Hamilton Gardens within the city's bounds. Leg bands and transmitters were used to identify the birds for the first three weeks. The release occurred in May 2009 and attracted much media and public attention with reported sightings proving invaluable to the project post release. Public assistance again proved invaluable as the project team relied on sightings to track the birds with an unexpected and welcome side effect being previously unsighted unbanded bellbirds being reported.

The success of this project could not have been achieved without a multi-agency approach. The expertise of the Department of Conservation in undertaking many predator control and habitat restoration programmes combined with Landcare Research's extensive knowledge in the behaviour and ecology of the Tui and other native bird species has improved the chances of this project succeeding and its focus being broadened to include other native bird species.

Community volunteer groups are essential for continuing Halo objectives into the long-term. Throughout the seven control sites, bait stations networks have been installed and the likes of volunteer groups can supplement Council-funded control through refilling these stations. In addition, the ongoing native planting initiatives by other organisations and volunteer groups will result in providing an increased food source for the city's increasing populations of native birds.