

# Haast Tokoeka: mountain kiwi on the edge



Tokoeka habitat on the Haast Range.

The Haast tokoeka (meaning weka with a 'toko' or walking stick) is a critically endangered variety of kiwi numbering about 250 birds. Their reddish colour and shorter and more down-curved bill distinguish them from the southern tokoeka found in Fiordland and on Stewart Island. The bill and the legs are pale ivory coloured. A research programme, begun in 1990 as part of the Kiwi Recovery Programme, is looking at the basic biology of the birds, identifying threats to them, and monitoring population trends.

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## Habitat

Haast tokoeka kiwi are sparsely distributed from the lowlands at the foot of the hills to the subalpine tussock grasslands and mountain peaks, mainly on the Haast Range (between the Waitototo and Arawhata Rivers) in South Westland. They are separated from southern tokoeka to the south by 50 km of very barren terrain including the ultramafic Olivine Range, while the closest kiwi population to the north is the distinct species of Okarito brown kiwi, 150 km away.



Male Haast tokoeka caught in subalpine environment.

## Threats

The very harsh subalpine environment that most Haast tokoeka live in may be the most important reason why they have survived the onslaught of introduced predators. Kiwi eggs laid here are safe from marauding possums and the lower density of stoats and cats—the chief predators of young kiwi—means that chicks are more likely to survive to a 'safe size' (about 1 kg).



Typical stoat-kill sign. Over 90% of kiwi chicks fail to survive the first 6 months of life.

Most Haast tokoeka are found near or above the bushline even though the climate is more severe than in the lowlands. They maintain year-round territories of about 100 ha in these areas, despite night-time winter temperatures that average -6°C. They begin building nests and laying single eggs as early as July, and the nests are often covered by snow, requiring tunnels for access.



The same tokoeka nest before and after snow.



Kiwi chicks are not the principal prey of stoats; they usually live on more readily available food—mice, rats, small birds and eggs, rabbits, hares, and carcasses of larger animals. However, stoats will eat kiwi chicks if they encounter them; generally they only eat the brain and leave the rest of the body.



Lowland forest: more benign habitat preferred by possums and stoats

Both males and females incubate the single egg—the male by day and through the first hours of the night and the female during the rest of the night

Important kiwi food items in the subalpine tussock grasslands include earthworms, alpine cicada nymphs, giant weevils and ground weta.



During the winter Haast tokoeka use their stout bills to probe under flat rocks to find large (50 mm) hibernating alpine ground weta (*Zealandosandrus maculifrons*)

Solar heating: burrows and nests can be found under large flat schist rocks which face the sun, therefore receiving the maximum amount of warmth during the day.



for further information visit [www.kiwirecovery.org.nz](http://www.kiwirecovery.org.nz)

