

The world

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New Zealand



Tahī wags his tail as he sniffs through the bags spread out on the dock. He must make sure that no rodents have entered the bags.

PHOTOS: JOHAN AUGUSTIN



Fact: "Predator free 2050"

- New Zealand has already lost many endemic species to 'ferals', and overall the country has already seen a third of its bird species extirpated by human presence. However, New Zealand is also outstanding in rebuilding the populations of threatened species, with a third of the country now protected in various reserves.
- Every year "ferals" are estimated to kill 25 million birds in New Zealand, which has also led to 4,000 native species being threatened or at risk of extinction - one of the highest rates in the world.
- "Predator Free 2050" consists of 18 projects that have so far eradicated rats, martens and possums from a total of over 100,000 hectares, where the result is that many bird species are now increasing in number again.

Source: Predator Free New Zealand



The English cocker spaniel Tahī is a "pest detection dog", a dog that detects pests. Here, Julie Hill and Tahī investigate a wooden tunnel that mice and rats run through.



The boat departs from Picton which is located on the northern part of the South Island, known as a gateway to the scenic Marlborough Sounds.



The English cocker spaniel Tahī.



Julie Hill is a park ranger at the state Department of Conservation, DOC.

New Zealand must exterminate all rats - throughout the country

New Zealand has a huge problem with invasive species that are hitting the country's endemic wildlife. A campaign is now underway that has set the goal of, among other things, exterminating all rats in the entire country - and the residents are happy to help.

he sniffs his way through the cows that are deployed on the quay. The English one Tahī wags his tail when the cocker spaniel is a "pest detection dog", a dog that detects pests, which must make sure that no rodents have gotten into the bags.

The boat departs from Picton, which is located on the northern part of the South Island, known as a gateway to the scenic Marlborough Sounds. On board with Tahī is her mother - Julie Hill - a park ranger from the state Department of Conservation, DOC - an authority that works with environmental protection and conservation issues.

New Zealand has many endemic species, which for a long time lived in a sanctuary that ended when invasive species, or "ferals", such as rats, possums and various martens invaded the island nation. It became something of an open buffet that was served to the newcomers whose arrival has already led to the extinction of many bird species and other species are highly threatened.

However, the country's government has decided to stop the massacre and therefore started the "Predator Free 2050" campaign eight years ago with the goal of exterminating all of the country's rats, possums and martens (ermine, ferrets and weasels) by 2050.

That's where dogs like Tahī come into the picture, where the authority has a large number of dog patrols for pest control spread all over the country,

- Dogs have become a new trend in our work, says Julie Hill as she gets off the catamaran.

We have arrived on the small island of Motuara, and Tahī, who is trained to detect the scent of mice and rats, pulls on the leash to tackle the island's many vulnerable traps. Motuara Island has been completely free of rodents for at least a decade, and the difference between the island and the mainland is striking, says Julie.

- The birdlife is rich here on the island again now, she says and explains that the new sanctuary has also become a breeding ground for endangered kiwi birds, "which are decreasing in the wild and increasing in numbers in protected places".

Tahī disappears into a path in the forest, where the chirping of birds from different species takes over. On a branch sits a small bird, a "green



New Zealand has many endemic species, which for a long time lived in a sanctuary. But invasive species, such as rats, possums and various martens invaded the island nation.

IMAGE: FRANCOIS MORI

bird", at close range, and looks curiously at the new visitors.

- It is not shy by itself, and unfortunately also trusts predators, says Julie.

Keeping track of invasive predators is an ongoing task. An island like Motuara is checked every year. In a trap, a dead rat was found on the island. It had been taken there by a bird. On board one of the passenger boats, a dead mouse was also discovered in a loaf of bread.

It proves that the authorities can never let go of the garden, where "rats can swim long distances" and jump onto boats as stowaways, says Julie.

Tahī runs up to the first "tracking tunnel" that had shown traces of rodents on the island, but it, just like all the others, is completely intact. In the war against "ferals", many aids are allowed which, in addition to dogs, include new technologies such as "smart traps" and AI. When it comes to rats, a combination of traps and poisons is used, and the national campaign has paid off, says Julie.

There are now many more areas that are completely free of the invasive species, where the ongoing campaign protects threatened species over huge areas, for example by working with private landowners. The project has also reached the homes of ordinary people who cooperate with the government in the giant field project "and set up traps in their gardens".

- It really went down well with everyone-

Our native species have evolved on an island without any mammalian predation. Their tactic is to sit lightning still when threatened, which makes them particularly vulnerable to new predators.

Jessi Morgan
"Predator Free 2050"

the public, says Jessi Morgan, who runs the project via the organization Predator Free New Zealand Trust.

Successfully eradicating all rats from an entire country like New Zealand can sound like taking water over your head. But Jessi Morgan believes the project can succeed.

- We use different tools and learn along the way. We have already succeeded in eradicating rats from many areas, she says.

Another predator that probably does the most damage of all mentioned are feral cats, which will be added to the list at the end of the year.

- The reason why it did not happen earlier was that it was not accepted

by the public. Opinion has changed now, says Jessi. Some say that nature should take its course and that endangered species adapt to new circumstances over time. What do you say about that?

- Our native species have evolved on an island without any mammal predation. Their tactic is to sit lightning still when threatened, which makes them particularly vulnerable to new predators, says Jessi and clarifies:
- We have time to lose them all before they do adapt.

With drones and the latest AI technology through landscape cameras, large areas can be scanned and discover, for example, a lone rat, something that was not possible before. At the same time, Jessi admits that it will be very difficult to get rid of all the mice in the country, because they are "small and multiply quickly". The marsupials, which were introduced to New Zealand from Australia in the last century through the fur trade, have spread like wildfire, causing extensive damage to vegetation, agriculture and bird life. At the same time, it is probably the easiest species to eradicate, Jessi believes, "because they reproduce slowly".

- We spread poison with the help of, among other things, helicopters, she says, and at the same time wants to underline that it is not about "killing for the sake of killing".
- We do it to save our own native species.

The catamaran docks at the next pier-

ga in the Marlborough Sounds. This time it is not an island but the mainland, where the famous Queen Charlotte Track starts at the top of the South Island. Here, Tahī is kept connected and there is good reason for that.

- It's completely different here than on Motuara, says Julie and pulls in Tahī, who is going "like crazy" when he gets off the jetty.

- These bushes are perfect rat habitats, Julie points out when her dog has been exposed to rodents nearby.

Until now, the mainland has largely been considered lost ground when it comes to "ferals", and environmental efforts to get rid of invasive species have instead concentrated on islands or protected areas such as peninsulas. On a patch of grass, a week goes by.

The flightless bird has been easy prey for new predators such as cats and martens while the chicks and eggs have been eaten by rats. This means that the bird is now an unusual sight in New Zealand.

The work to save the country's threatened nature is in full swing, and that includes a four-legged individual who can't stop wagging his tail.

- He helps to save species that are on the brink of extinction, says Julie and walks with Tahī into the dense forest where the ground is covered with ferns.
- He really loves his job.

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