

By Dave Smith

Eighty years after they disappeared from the South Island, buff wekas are about to be reintroduced as part of a \$100,000 project.

After five years of negotiation and planning, the Department of Conservation and Ngai Tahu have received the blessing of Chatham Island iwi to capture 30 of the birds and transport them to Wanaka.

Doc Wanaka projects manager Stu Thorne said yesterday he would spend the next week in the Chathams capturing the birds.

It was hoped the precious cargo would be taken to Stevenson's Island (Te Peka Karaka) on Lake Wanaka and released early next Saturday morning.

Buff weka were the only one of four sub-species to roam Central Otago and the east coast of the South Island until the 1920s, when they died out.

"Luckily, in 1905 an early pioneer shipped 12 birds to the Chathams, where they thrived," Mr Thorne said.

Attempts to reintroduce the birds to Arthurs Pass and Banks Peninsula had been unsuccessful.

Mr Thorne said Kai Tahu Papatipu Runaka o Otago had been negotiating with the four Chatham Island iwis for some time and recently gained permission to take birds off the island.

It is estimated the island's weka population numbers about 60,000.

Mr Thorne said 16 female and 14 male juvenile birds would be taken to Stevenson's Island and spend up to two months acclimatising in purpose-built aviaries on the island before being released.

"This is an important step in a long-term project to protect the species. In doing so, it provides an opportunity for Kai Tahu to restore a treasured asset of the past."

The bird held significance for Maori as an important food source, and also for oil, which was once used for preserving fishing lines, tattooing, mixed with speargrass to make perfume and also medicinally, to help reduce inflammation, rheumatism and bruises.

The feathers adorned cloaks and the skin was used for cloth, while spear tips were made from sharpened weka bones.

Mr Thorne said the flightless bird was very "people-friendly", which was why there was a "no dogs and no fires" policy for Stevenson's Island.

Once there was a sustainable population on the island, Mr Thorne said it was hoped to establish colonies on Silver Island on Lake Hawea and eventually other places.

ODT Saturday, 21-September 2002

→ Stronza's Island

DOE / NT joint project

30 butt mha - 1920's dived out

1905 → Chateaux

\$100,000

+ 10,000 NZ NPe Can Food. - Road source

how many DOE

" " TH -

ODT ~~Mariani~~ 'permission' given by Chateaux Isl.
(mi)

~~auto~~ auiay

5 years of negotiate 21/9/02 ODT