

## ENDEMIC SPECIES FEATURE

### TOUTOUWAI

#### *Petroica australis* (South Island robin)

The toutouwai, or South Island robin, (*Petroica australis*) is a small endemic passerine. As insectivorous ground-foraging forest birds, robins prefer mature forests with a closed canopy and open understory with moist soil. It is well recognisable by its erect stance and relatively long legs. Toutouwai are sedentary in their breeding territories throughout their lifetime and are monogamous and usually pair with their partner for life. During the breeding season from August until late December the female incubates two to three eggs (rarely four) in each of up to three successful clutches.

Toutouwai are often described as 'friendly' and inquisitive as they seem to follow humans around and even perch on people's boots (if you keep still!). It is thought that toutouwai used to follow moa in the forest to pick up invertebrates disturbed by moa. For toutouwai, bipedal humans may hence be seen as substitutes for moa fulfilling the same function of stirring up insects.

Toutouwai are the second most common bird species after kiwi to be translocated and often the first bird species to be reintroduced for ecosystem restoration projects. The Brook Waimārama Sanctuary is the only fenced sanctuary which did not have to reintroduce toutouwai because a remnant population survived along the top ridges between Jenkins Hill and Third House. Toutouwai survived there as rat densities are lower at higher altitude locations and predation pressure is reduced.

Their poor dispersal abilities together with being fiercely territorial, non-migratory and having an inquisitive nature makes robins relatively easy to monitor. Toutouwai are regarded as ideal indicator species for the effectiveness of pest control operations since their breeding success is strongly affected by introduced predator abundance. It is only on pest-free islands and in pest-free fenced sanctuaries that toutouwai can fully benefit from their prolific breeding capabilities. In a Dunedin study, breeding success varied between less than 10% at an uncontrolled site and more than 80% at a pest free site!

Based on this, we can expect to see a lot more toutouwai at the Brook Waimārama Sanctuary over the next few years. A lot more!

Written by:

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All photos by Robert Schadewinkel



Toutouwai perching male



Toutouwai fledgling fitted with radio transmitter



Male toutouwai perched on a boot