

Predator Free SOUTH WESTLAND

15 December 2023

Nau mai, haere mai!

Welcome to the sixth Predator Free South Westland newsletter.



Katie Milne
Stewart Nimmo

A word from Katie Milne (Project Chair)

Though it's been a few months since the last of these newsletters, make no mistake—the Predator Free South Westland team have been hard at work, with some huge wins to celebrate. As a result of their efforts, an abundance of birds can now be regularly spotted in the Ōkārito Sanctuary, including rifleman/tītītipounamu, yellow-fronted kākārīki, kea, shining cuckoo/pīpīwharaurao, long-tailed cuckoo/koekoeā, South Island robin/kakaruai, and grey warbler/riroriro. If you haven't been there lately, then I encourage you to do so on the next fine day.

The next step, planned for early 2024, will be to eliminate possums, rats and stoats from North Ōkārito and the Whataroa Township, which will bring us another big step closer to our goal of a predator free South Westland. If you live in Whataroa you will hear plenty from the PFSW team in the lead-up to this operation.

A personal highlight for me in recent times was hearing directly from members of the community at our board meeting in July—thank you for your voices, and for your contribution. By working together, we will get there!

All the best for a fun and relaxing summer break.

Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou—warm greetings to you all.

Katie.

Project update

Predator Free South Westland is on track to eliminate possums, rats, and stoats across 107,000 hectares from the mountains to the sea by mid-2025.

Work is now well underway across 80% of the project area.

Within this area, we have completed initial predator removal in the Perth-Barlow, Butler-Whataroa and South Ōkārito blocks—a combined total of 43,570 hectares. Each of these represent a major milestone for the project, and the removal of predators is already beginning to deliver some exciting benefits for nature and the community. But our work here is not over!

Our extensive network of cameras and remote reporting devices, along with our trusty detection dogs, are continuing to keep an eye (or a nose) out for any invaders so that we can respond quickly when they arrive.

We all have a part to play in protecting these areas as a predator free haven. If you spot any sign of a rat, possum or stoat, please let us know via communitysupport@zip.org.nz. Over the summer period you can also help by checking vehicles, boats and camping equipment for any furry stowaways as you move through South Westland.

As we work to maintain predator freedom within the managed areas, we have also begun to remove predators from the Burster and Price Ranges, and are preparing to begin work in the remaining areas from early 2024.



Yellow-fronted kākārīki, South Ōkārito Bradley Shields



Kārearea (New Zealand falcon), Waiiau (Waiho) Valley Chad Cottle

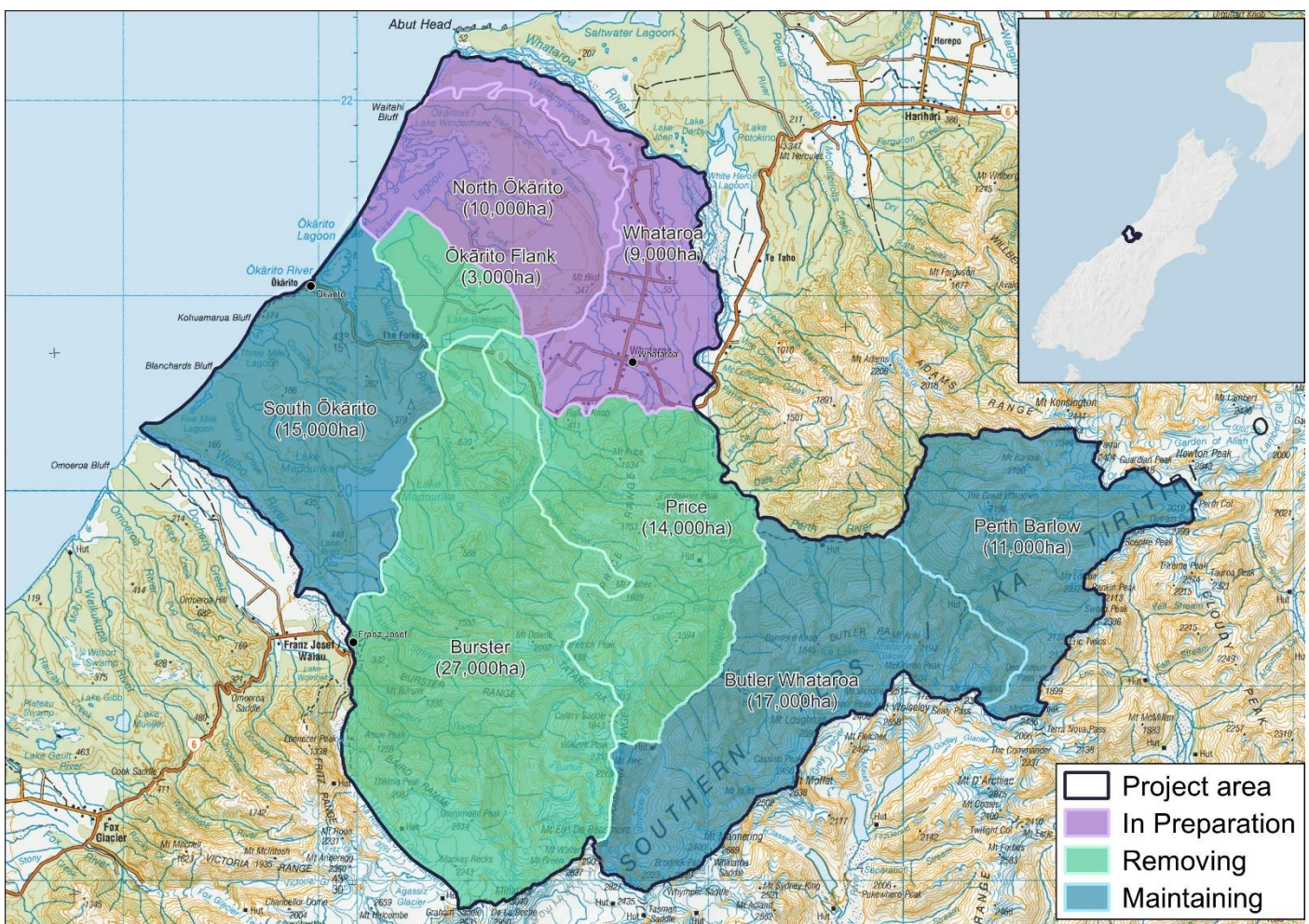
How are we eliminating predators in South Westland?

Removal

- The complete removal of all resident possums, rats and stoats from an area surrounded by defensible boundaries (e.g. mountains, rivers and ocean)
- In backcountry and forested areas, this is usually achieved with an initial aerial operation followed by 'mop-up' using ground-based and aerial methods
- In areas where people live and work, we use ground-based methods
- Our intensive detection network tells us when removal has been achieved

Maintenance

- Once predators are removed, the area must be protected against reinvasion, to maintain the benefits
- A network of detection devices keeps an eye out for invaders
- When a possum, rat or stoat is detected, we quickly respond to remove the predator(s) before they can re-establish in the area
- The long-term cost to maintain predator freedom is much lower than repeated or ongoing landscape-scale control, so over time we can scale up the elimination to larger areas



Eliminating predators from the townships and farmland

Although the majority of Predator Free South Westland is forested, wild and remote, there are also large areas of farmland, and the townships of Ōkārito, Whataroa and Franz Josef—about 14,000 hectares altogether. Eliminating predators from the places where people live and work requires a specific toolset and a great deal of community support. For example, right now we are working hard to eliminate predators from the Franz Josef area, using traps, over 2,000 bait stations, and hunting with predator detection dogs. Bait-take has been steadily declining, and nearly 400 possums have been removed by the dog-handlers!

Much of this predator elimination is being carried out on private land, and is made possible by people and businesses in the community who have welcomed our team to their properties. We are extremely grateful for their ongoing support and engagement.

Thriving forest in South Ōkārito



Thomas Paul measures tree growth in South Westland Maggie Nichols

A few weeks ago, Climate Scientist Thomas Paul (from the research organisation SCION) and some of our field team surveyed the forest south of the Cook River / Weheka, an area outside the PFSW project footprint where no aerial pest control has ever been carried out. They then headed to Ōkārito, where Thomas was blown away by the regeneration of the native forest, including lots of young rimu and kāmahī. Thomas said the Ōkārito forest was very unique, as most forests he sees look browsed out like that south of the Weheka!

Investigating eDNA to track down rats in the backcountry

Every living thing leaves traces of its presence in the environment, through a dropped leaf, a slime trail, or a preened feather. As these items decay, tiny traces of DNA remain and are referred to as environmental DNA (eDNA). This eDNA can be collected from water samples and sequenced at a lab, revealing a snapshot of the plants and animals in the area.

Our team has been exploring eDNA detection over the last year and a half to learn whether it could have a role in our work. So far, the results are promising—eDNA is looking like it will be a sensitive and cost-efficient technique to help us determine whether or not rats are present within a catchment, particularly in rugged and remote terrain. It may even be able to help us track biodiversity changes as the project progresses!



A field ranger installs a water sampler to collect eDNA from a creek in South Ōkārito Carey Lintott

Meet the team – Kate Smith, Field Team Support

Kate joined the Predator Free South Westland team in May 2021 as Field Team Support. Her role behind the scenes is a crucial and varied one, and she wears many hats – one team member affectionately refers to her as “Quartermaster.” In short, she equips the local team with the necessary gear, tools and parts to carry out the day-to-day work. However, no title sufficiently describes the variety of tasks that fall under her umbrella of expertise. As a long-time dog owner, Kate also fits naturally on the Dog Safety Team, providing the communities of Predator Free South Westland with information, advice and resources to help keep their dogs safe around predator removal.



Oliver, Kate and Tali, Tuke River

Originally hailing from Tasmania, Kate has called Franz Josef home for the past 21 years. Glacier guiding lured her to the town, and the wild natural beauty of the area kept her there. An avid outdoors enthusiast, her thirst for the mountains did not subside when she became a mother. Armed with a pram, she pushed through the Heaphy Track, and she and her son Oliver have been conquering trails together ever since. Thankfully, these days Oliver, now 11 years old, carries his own pack! Kate thoroughly enjoys being part of the Predator Free South Westland team, and says “the flexibility of this work allows me to continue doing the things I love and sharing special moments with my son.”

Kate also enjoys ski touring with the dogs in the winter months and canine-sports year-round. When the weather is not good enough for adventuring, she sews and felts unique apparel and other items.

Who are we?

Predator Free South Westland (PFSW) is an ambitious five-year project to restore 107,000 hectares in South Westland by eliminating possums, rats and stoats. The project area contains forested and alpine areas, rural land, and the townships of Franz Josef, Whataroa and Ōkārito, and is bounded by the Whataroa and Waiau (Waiho) Rivers, the crest of the Southern Alps / Kā Tiritiri o te Moana, and the shores of the Tasman Sea / Te Tai-o-Rēhua, which provide natural barriers to predator reinvasion.

Zero Invasive Predators (ZIP) is leading the predator elimination approach for this project, in partnership with the local community. Keep an eye out for the friendly team – you may see us out and about.

Keeping in touch

Your ongoing input and support is critical to the success of Predator Free South Westland.

The Community Team consists of Wendy Rakete-Stones, Rhianna Hughes Eddy, Sandy Hodges, and Pouri Rakete-Stones. You can contact them at communitysupport@zip.org.nz.

Thanks to the people of South Westland, our partners and funders. We couldn't do this without you.



Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

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