

Reassessment of Kiwi Handling Protocol with Tongariro District Kiwi

Background

Following the tragic death of a kiwi chick (T.Spe14 "Brill") caused by releasing a kiwi who still had its leg restraint attached, the need to reassess and develop a robust protocol around kiwi handling was undertaken. This reassessment looked at the probable cause of the failures and at procedures that could be implemented to ensure this never happens again. Other failures that had not resulted in death were also looked at so that these too could be eliminated when handling kiwi.

What happened

The chick was picked up from Rainbow and transported to Whakapapa Village, en route to its release into Tongariro Forest. At the Whakapapa DOC Workshop (on the office deck), a transmitter and strap was fitted by [REDACTED], and after handling instructions were given, the kiwi was held by a new DOC hut ranger during the transmitter attachment process. There were a few other DOC staff around at the time. During the transmitter attachment, the kiwi's legs were tied together with electrical tape (to restrain the bird), although a kiwi cuff (foam spacer) was not used.

The tape is always removed after the transmitter is attached, however on this occasion, this failed to occur. The bird was then placed back in its transfer box, and taken into the forest by [REDACTED].

A release site was found, and an offer made to [REDACTED] if she would like to release the bird. She was again given verbal instructions on how to handle the bird. The bird was under ferns in the transfer box, and [REDACTED] removed the kiwi from the box and placed it in the release hole. Some ferns were placed over the release hole and a karakia said.

Discussion

This involved looking at the two failures and trying to understand what contributed to these failures. These two failures were:

- 1) Not removing the leg strap after the transmitter was fitted and
- 2) Not realising that the bird still had its leg restraint attached prior to release

Contributing factors:

- 1) In both these failures there was a level of distraction with the practitioners involved trying to provide a memorable kiwi experience to other individuals. Discussion was raised around time pressures, distraction caused by personal issues and failures arising from over-familiarity. However after this discussion these three factors were not considered relevant in this case.
- 2) Kiwi Handling Best Practice¹ allows for non-accredited handlers to handle kiwi, provided that the technique in holding a kiwi has been demonstrated, and they are closely supervised when they are handling the bird. Thus, best practice handling was followed. However, there is a possibility if [REDACTED] had handled the kiwi prior to release that he may have picked up that the tape was still attached to the legs.

- 3) A foam spacer was not used. This is pink or blue and quite visible. It is a possibility that [REDACTED] would have seen the foam spacer had it been used.

Having researched further it would appear that on two prior occasions over a period of approximately 12 years, straps have been left on kiwi when they should have been removed. This is the first time that it has resulted in a death.

Outcome

The highest probability is that the failures were the result of being distracted while fitting the transmitter with the help of a non-practitioner in an open workshop environment and a kiwi handler not handling the bird at the release site. I do not feel that over-familiarity played any part in these failures but practitioners need to be fully focussed and not distracted in any way.

Recommendations

The team have come up with the following recommendations:

1. A kiwi practitioner is appointed responsible for the health and safety of every kiwi for each stage of a kiwi operation. This will be done during the toolbox talk at the start of the day and will not necessarily be the team leader. The appointed person is responsible for ensuring the welfare of the bird throughout each stage and is to ensure that best practice is followed (i.e. handling, transmitter attachment). Note: this will not necessarily be one person for the whole operation.
2. The transmitter is to be fitted at the release site and is to involve only kiwi practitioners.
3. If the legs of a kiwi chick are to be restrained then a coloured foam spacer ("kiwi cuff") must be used always.
4. Adult and sub-adult kiwi are only to be taken from the kiwi box once (for an advocacy event) prior to being released.
5. All kiwi must be removed from the transfer box by a kiwi practitioner.
6. All kiwi must be released into the release hole by a kiwi practitioner and observed to be in good health and capable of normal movement.
7. The fauna supervisor will write up a check list and this will be carried in all kiwi kits by Tongariro kiwi practitioners. There will be a final ("paranoia") check of the bird prior to release- this will involve checking the transmitter is on, and that the leg restraint has been removed.
8. Kiwi chicks destined for TFKS are not to be used for advocacy events without the supervisors prior knowledge.

¹ Excerpt from Kiwi Best Practice Manual (2017) on "Handling Kiwi at Public and Commercial Advocacy Events":

"For release events only (i.e. not commercial viewing operations), in recognition of the fact that there is sometimes an extra spiritual connection formed by actually holding a bird, a non-accredited person may hold each bird after an accredited trainer has explained and demonstrated the correct handling technique. The accredited trainer must remain close to the non-accredited handler so that they can immediately take the bird back if necessary. The time spent holding a bird or egg must be limited to the absolute minimum required to get photographs. Do not allow others to touch or stroke the bird while it is being held by a

non-accredited handler.”

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