Managing introduced wild animals:

Annual summary

2024/25

Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa
New Zealand Government

Managing introduced wild animals: Annual summary

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Introduction

Managing introduced wild animals

Introduced wild goats, deer, pigs, tahr and chamois damage Aotearoa New Zealand's native plants and habitats by browsing on vegetation and trampling soils. In some places, they threaten how ecosystems function.

These animals can:

- change the types and numbers of plants
- change soil qualities
- prevent forests from regenerating.

By managing introduced browsing animals, native species can be protected, and the health and resilience of forests improved, especially in the face of climate change. The goal of the Department of Conservation Te Papa Atawhai (DOC), as part of Te Mana o Te Taiao – Aotearoa New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy, is to remove these animals from high-priority areas and threatened ecosystems. We also aim to manage their numbers elsewhere to maintain functioning ecosystems and preserve cultural and recreational values.

Sites are nationally prioritised for inclusion in the programme, based on factors including:

- the conservation value of a site (example: the amount and types of native plants)
- vegetation impacts
- other threats and pressures at a site (example: the presence of possums or the risk of wild animals reinvading from neighbouring land)
- the feasibility of carrying out operations (example: what the terrain is like, and how much an operation might cost)
- community values and other conservation activities happening at a site.

We work with others to manage introduced browsers and protect native plants and habitats. A big thank you goes to our iwi and hapū partners, hunting and conservation organisations, people working in farming and agriculture, and our contractors for helping achieve this work and protecting New Zealand's native plants and wildlife.

Our 2024/25 work programme

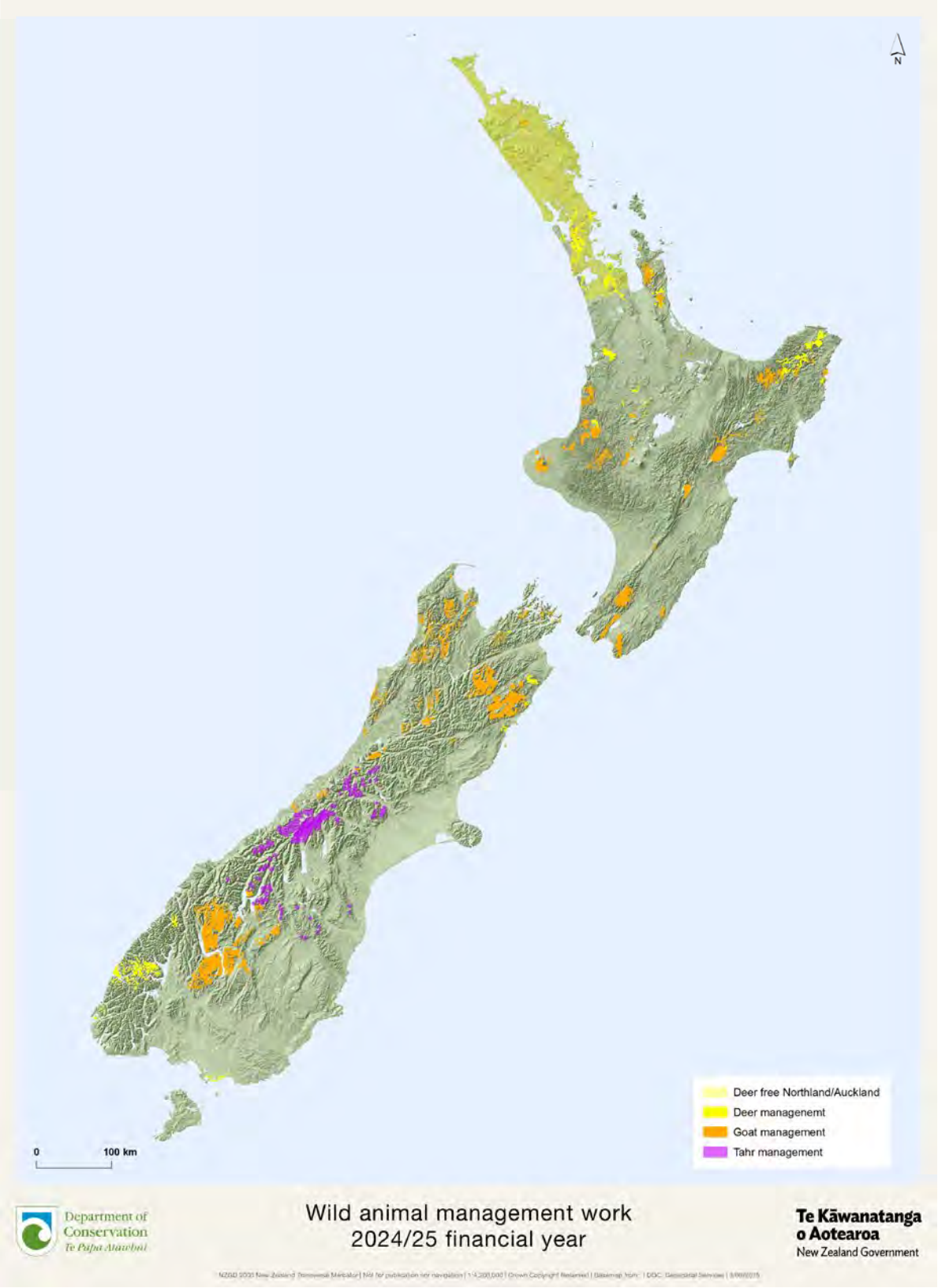
We have continued to focus on wild goat control to protect ecosystems and prevent their spread, including work to keep goats out of Mount Aspiring, Arthur's Pass, Nelson Lakes, and Tongariro national parks. We also worked on preventing wild sika deer from establishing in the Hauturu area (in the Waikato District), developing a deer management plan for Ruahine Forest Park, and increasing wild deer management in Fiordland. Because introduced browsers are difficult to contain, a significant operational priority is stopping them from establishing in conservation areas and national parks.

We also received over $10 million in additional funding through the International Visitor Levy. We have started using it this year, with most work planned over the coming years. In most cases, it will expand on existing work, with a focus on national parks and high-use visitor areas.

We finished the year having delivered 1,167,053 hectares of wild goat control and 214,366 hectares of deer management, and over 350 hours of aerial tahr control, including equivalent control effort delivered through ground-based operations (see map next page).

Sites we're managing

Managing introduced wild animals



Lake McRae, Molesworth Recreation Reserve, looking west. *Photo: Patrick Crowe*

Preventing the spread of introduced browsers across the country is a priority. To address this, we targeted key conservation areas and national parks, including the Russell Forest, Coromandel and Kaweka Forest Parks, and Tongariro, Kahurangi, Nelson Lakes and Mount Aspiring National Parks.

Read on for some key operational highlights.

Wild deer and goat work

During 2024/25, we delivered 1,167,053 hectares of wild goat control and 214,366 hectares of deer management. Our 2024/25 work programme aimed to build on the progress made in 2023/24, continuing our efforts in the same main areas. Significant operational highlights include the following.

Protecting Molesworth's biodiversity: Wild goat control in Turk's Head, Marlborough

Turk's Head in Molesworth Recreation Reserve is one of Marlborough's most ecologically significant landscapes, home to rare plant species and fragile ecosystems increasingly threatened by wild goats. Since 2022, we have led targeted wild goat control operations in this area.

The goal: to protect wild goat-free zones, preserve high-value ecosystems and conserve threatened species, such as *Carmichaelia kirkii* (climbing broom), which is highly palatable to goats, and *Leptinella filiformis* (slender button daisy), which is nationally critical and vulnerable to trampling and disturbance. These efforts also align with broader control work across the Tone River and Clarence Valley.

Operations are strategically planned across three main blocks: Elliott, Lake McRae and Gloster, with teams typically spending 10 days in the field to maximise coverage and impact.

Figure 1 shows goat control for Elliott, Gloster and Lake McRae from 2022/23 to 2024/25.

Results at a glance

2022

1,436

GOATS

3.36 goats per hour

2023

1,624

GOATS

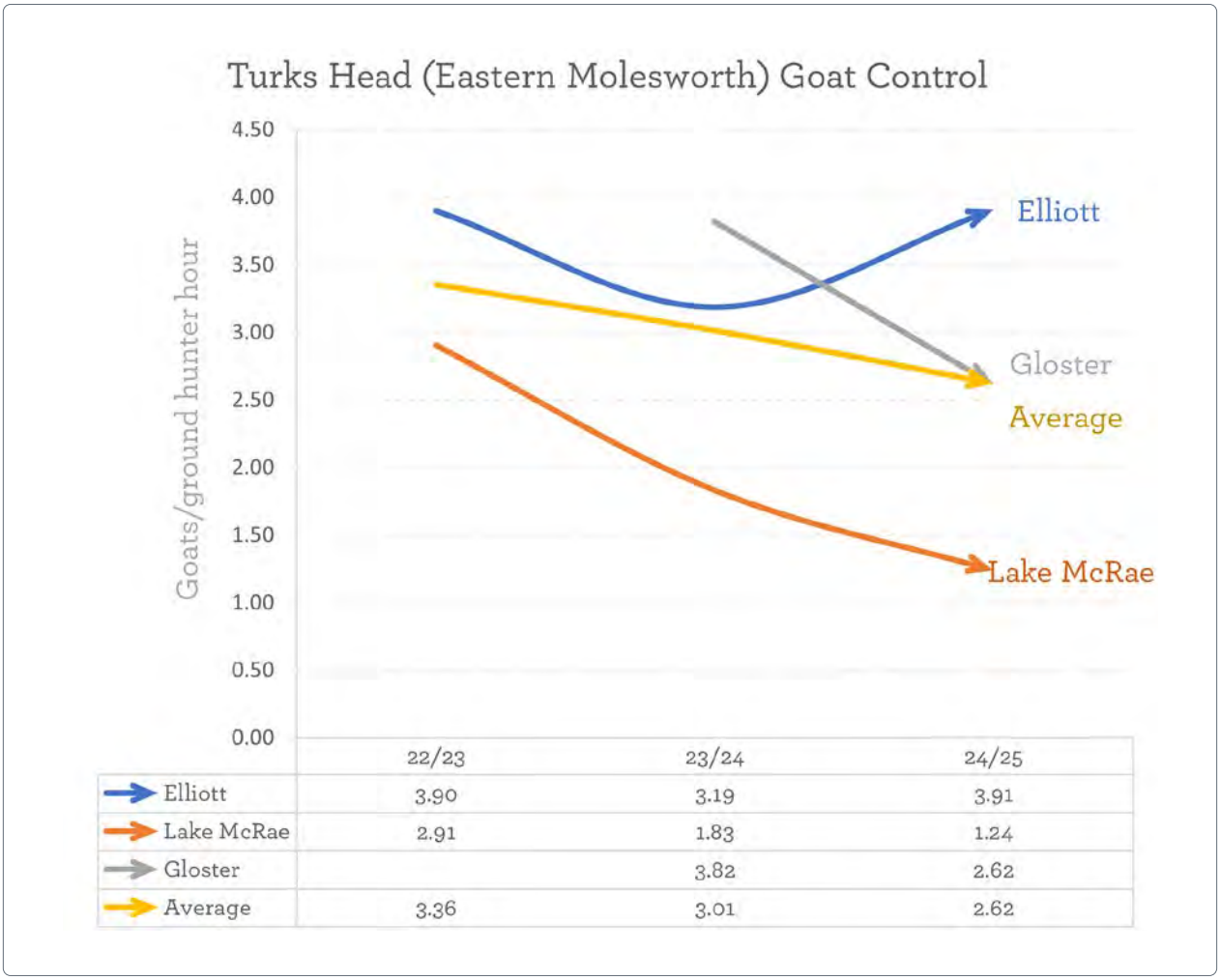
3.01 goats per hour

2024

1,677

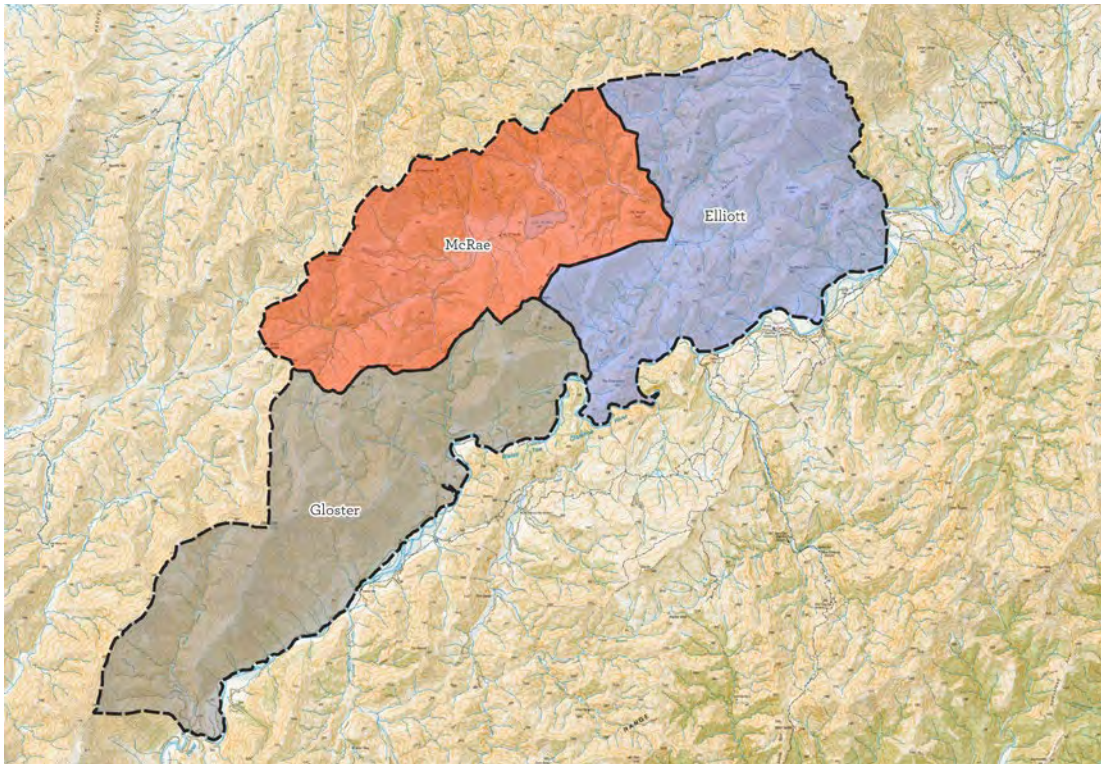
GOATS

2.62 goats per hour



	22/23	23/24	24/25
Elliott	3.90	3.19	3.91
Lake McRae	2.91	1.83	1.24
Gloster		3.82	2.62
Average	3.36	3.01	2.62

Figure 1: Turks Head (eastern Molesworth Recreation Reserve) goats controlled per ground hunter hour (Fig 1 pt 1 above & Fig 1 pt 2 below)



Wild goats. *Photo: Rowan Hindmarsh-Walls*

While total goat kills have increased as overall effort has increased, the decline in goats per hunter hour indicates a reduction in goat density because the wild goats are harder to find, especially in Lake McRae and Gloster. The Elliott block, however, has shown no change, highlighting the need for continued work.

In 2025/26, we will partner with the Marlborough branch of the New Zealand Deerstalkers Association to scale up efforts. Over 30 hunters will take part in a 3-day management hunt, followed by a 10-day DOC-led operation. This collaborative approach boosts capacity and strengthens community involvement in conservation.

We remain committed to sustained goat control in Turk's Head, ensuring long-term protection of Molesworth Recreation Reserve's unique biodiversity and the integrity of its iconic high-country landscapes.

Ruahine Forest Park

Two large wild goat control operations have helped to keep the Ruahine Forest Park free from wild goats. Work on wild goat control in the park has been under way since 2020 and was able to be scaled up thanks to Budget 2022. Over 1,500 wild goats have been removed from the park so far. In the 2024/25 financial year:

- **Operation 1** focused on the southern Ruahine Forest Park and its buffer zone. Over 1,000 hours of work resulted in the removal of more than 100 goats.
- **Operation 2** covered the northeastern Ruahine Forest Park, its buffer zone and five Rangitīkei reserves. This effort logged 800 hours and removed over 500 goats.

Landowners in the affected areas have been supportive, granting contractors access to their land to ensure effective and coordinated goat control across the wider landscape.

Help us keep the forest goat free

If you spot a goat in the Ruahine Forest Park, please report it to wildanimalmanagement@doc.govt.nz. Include photos, GPS coordinates, a description and the location, if possible.

An exclosure plot in Ruahine Forest Park uses fencing to keep out browsing animals like deer and goats. DOC regularly monitors these plots to assess the impact of browsing on vegetation. *Photo: DOC*

To complement the wild goat control programme, we also started work on a wild deer management plan for the park with our Treaty partners. Monitoring in Ruahine Forest Park indicated relatively high numbers of wild deer, compared with national averages. Important understory plants, which help a forest regenerate and stabilise slopes, are disappearing.

To address these negative impacts, together with local iwi/hapū, we are working on the plan with advice from a newly established community deer advisory group. This group includes hunting, conservation and recreation organisations.

Basically, we're taking a flexible, science-based approach to develop the deer management plan.

We initially drafted an interim plan in 2024/25 and expect to release the final Ruahine deer plan in 2025/26. Trial actions carried out in 2024/25 will help inform the final plan.

Trial actions completed in 2024/25

- **New Zealand Deerstalkers Association hunt:** We worked with lower North Island branches to make it easier for hunters to fly by helicopter into the western and central area of Ruahine Forest Park. The hunt took place from 14 to 17 March 2025, with 81 deer removed. Hunters targeted hinds and provided DOC with GPS data showing where they had travelled and had successfully removed animals. We will work to analyse the findings and identify potential improvements for 2025/26, such as standardising data capture for future hunts.
- **DOC aerial management:** We carried out aerial hunting in the remote and hard to access Northwest Management Unit, an area of 16,000 hectares. Fifteen runs were completed in 2024/25, and wild deer numbers per hunting hour did not decrease as the work progressed. Over 720 wild deer were removed. This work complements possum and rat control being carried out in the northern Ruahine Forest Park, which is a high-priority ecosystem unit and an area with a rich and diverse range of habitats and species.

- **Industry and wild animal recovery operations (WARO) incentivisation:** We contracted the commercial venison industry to harvest 300 deer, operating under normal WARO permit conditions. We set out to test if we could increase the ability of the commercial sector to contribute more to wild animal management in the Ruahine Forest Park. A contract was set using a weight range to target lower weight deer that are normally less attractive to commercial industry. Operators harvested 143 wild deer in the first month of the WARO season, an increase compared with the total harvest in previous years.

All three actions combined make a start in addressing the effect of deer in the Ruahine Forest Park. We will continue working with the community to assess the effectiveness of each action and refine the deer management approach.

Wild sika and rusa deer removal in Hauturu, Waikato

We responded to an incursion of wild sika and rusa deer within the Hauturu area in the Waikato District outside their gazetted feral range. Preventing the spread of these species into new areas is a priority for us, because even small populations can expand rapidly, requiring substantial time and resources for removal and ongoing management.

Sika deer pose a greater ecological threat than other deer species, consuming vegetation typically avoided by other deer and contributing to forest degradation. If left uncontrolled, they could establish a population in the western King Country and cause significant environmental damage.

Collaboration was critical. Building on lessons from successful eradication efforts in the Waikato and Taranaki regions, including Whareorino Forest, we led a collaborative surveillance and control operation. This involved landowners, contractors and stakeholders, including Ngā Whenua Rāhui, New Zealand Carbon Farming, QEII National Trust and local farmers.

DOC rangers with Treaty partners discussing wild deer management in Ruahine Forest Park. *Photo: DOC*

What we did in 2024/25

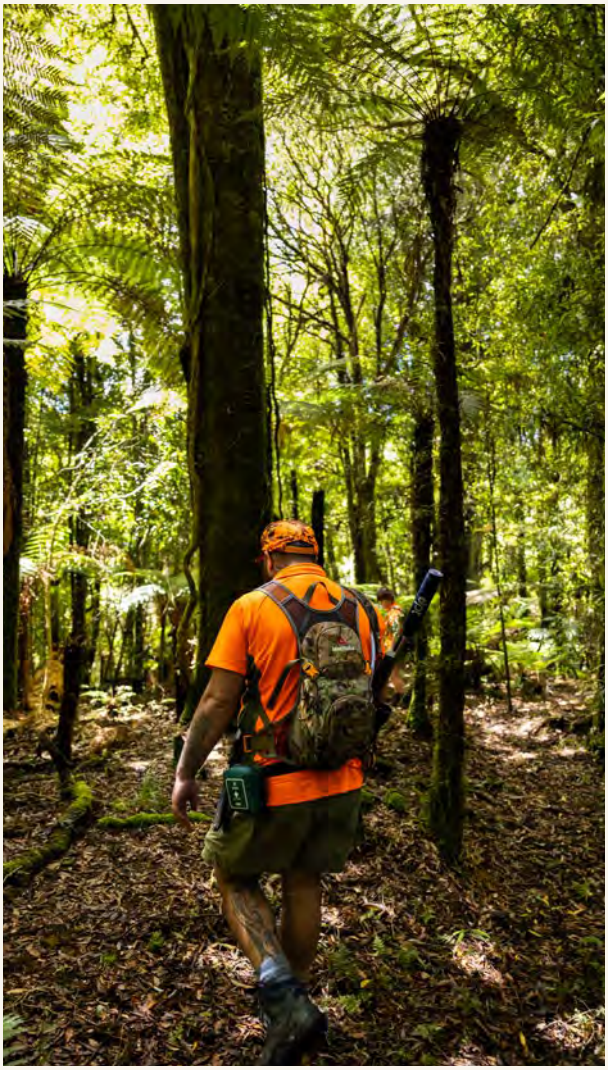
- Deployed 25 surveillance cameras and 25 acoustic monitoring devices to detect wild sika and rusa deer presence and vocalisations.
- Engaged a team of contractors with established relationships in the area.
- Conducted targeted hunting and surveillance across multiple land tenures.

Results

- Nine wild deer removed: 7 sika and 2 rusa.
- Surveillance detected 5 additional deer (4 sika, 1 rusa) still out there.

Looking ahead to 2025/26

- Target remaining individuals in spring.
- Expand surveillance to define the full extent of the incursion.
- Strengthen landowner engagement to fill access gaps and enable further hunting.



DOC ranger hunting in the Waikato District. *Photo: DOC*

Extreme terrain: tahr live in some of the most challenging terrains, making their management a tough task. *Photo: Sophie Carty*

Tahr control

We completed over 350 hours of aerial tahr control, including equivalent control effort delivered through ground-based operations. This was made up of around:

- 180 hours inside the defined tahr feral range
- 170 hours outside the feral range.

DOC-led work controlled almost 8,000 tahr in 2024/25, slightly higher than recent years. This year, nearly 30% of that control was done through ground-based hunting, far higher than in previous years. Ground-based hunting can be both cost efficient in areas of higher tahr density and effective when focused on low numbers of tahr in and around forest and scrub (for example, outside their feral range).

This work continued our focus on containing tahr within their feral range to protect New Zealand's unique alpine ecosystems. The 'feral range' is a defined area where tahr are legally allowed to live (defined in the Himalayan Thar Control Plan 1993). Inside the feral range, we focused on reducing tahr numbers at specific locations, particularly the Westland Tai Poutini and Aoraki Mount Cook national parks and the Hooker-Landsborough Wilderness Area.

Analysis of vegetation data shows that tussock grass heights at long-term plots are either similar or decreasing, compared with previous measures. This suggests that, in some places, recent tahr control has not yet resulted in recovery of alpine tussock grasslands from browsing. Further analysis of these data is under way to better understand other aspects of browsing impacts and vegetation recovery, such as seedling recruitment.

Substantial information about the tahr programme is available online, including information about 2025/26 operations and planning, maps showing where control has taken place since 2019, and scientific reports on tahr population and browsing impact monitoring.

DOC staff member assessing browse on alpine tussock in steep tahr habitat. The left tussock has substantial browse damage, while the one on the right has less. *Photo: Sophie Carty*

Wild animal detection dog and handler going through avian aversion test. *Photo: DOC*

Wild animal detection dog certifications

Specially trained wild animal detection dogs are a critical tool in New Zealand's efforts to manage introduced species like deer, goats, pigs and wallabies. These dogs help locate the wild animals that damage native ecosystems by grazing, outcompeting native species and disturbing ground-dwelling taonga.

To ensure they meet national standards, both dogs and handlers undergo rigorous assessments. Around 200 certificates were issued in 2024/25. Certified teams must also demonstrate stock avoidance and avian aversion skills, ensuring they work safely and effectively in conservation areas.

Wild animal detection dog bailing a wild goat.
Photo: Zac Beardmore

Systems we're improving

Coordination across public and private land

Wild deer, goats, pigs, chamois and tahr move freely across both public and private land. To improve how these animals are managed across the country, DOC is leading a national coordination group. This group brings together representatives from Māori, conservation, hunting, government, primary industry and research organisations.

In 2024/25, significant progress included the following.

Developing a national data system

At present, different organisations use their own systems to collect and manage wild animal control data. This makes it difficult to get a clear national picture of what's happening and where. To address this, DOC is working with Land Information New Zealand (LINZ), regional councils and the Ministry for Primary Industries to develop a shared data standard and a national system that brings everything together. This system will build on existing LINZ platforms used for wallabies, wilding pines and kauri dieback.

We're starting with the basics by collecting data on kills and sightings. A prototype is expected by 2025. Future updates may include more detailed data and support for other users, such as government agencies, forestry companies and wild animal recovery operators.

This is a big step forward. It will help us better understand what's happening across the country and support smarter, more coordinated decisions about managing wild animals.

Setting research priorities

Manaaki Whenua Landcare Research (now the Bioeconomy Science Institute) led work to identify and prioritise the research questions. This will help guide the development of a national research plan focused on the applied management of wild animals.

DOC ranger lining up a shot. *Photo: Karl Drury*

Sites we're monitoring

National context

We've made strong progress in understanding how our wild deer and goat management is best working to protect native ecosystems. Across Aotearoa New Zealand, we've launched standardised, on-the-ground monitoring to assess outcomes of our control efforts.

Our integrated and scalable monitoring design not only gives us the big picture but also the chance to zoom in on specific areas we manage, like Ruahine Forest Park, Whanganui, Omahuta and Puketī forests in Northland, Hauraki–Kapowai forests, Whanganui, Kahurangi National Park on the West Coast and the Murchison Mountains in Fiordland.

Using tools like the Faecal Pellet Index (animal droppings) and Seedling Ratio Index (vegetation impact), our teams are collecting robust, consistent data in challenging conditions. This skilled work helps us understand whether our interventions are making a difference.

Why does it matter? Wild deer and goats change forest ecosystems by targeting soft, nutrient-rich plants that play crucial roles in forest recovery, slope stability and biodiversity. These plants are important parts of flourishing forests, which support native birds, insects, snails and other invertebrates. Monitoring data helps us refine our approach to better protect these species and ecosystems.

We'll share results in 2025/26, with follow-up monitoring every 3 years. While full forest recovery takes decades, these rapid tools give early insights to support operational decisions. We're also tracking long-term change through permanent 20×20 metre plots in particular areas.

We continue to advise other organisations on best practice monitoring, including Horizons Regional Council, Raukūmara Pae Maunga Restoration Project and the Central North Island Sika Foundation Conservation Trust (Sika Foundation).

DOC biodiversity monitoring ranger carrying out Faecal Pellet Index monitoring. *Photo: Sophie Carty*

Local monitoring

Ruahine Forest Park

Ruahine Forest Park includes diverse forest types, including lowland podocarp-broadleaf to high-altitude mountain beech or pahautea. Over large areas, the original canopy has collapsed, replaced by shorter shrubland.

In 2023, we undertook park-wide monitoring to support the development of the Ruahine Deer Management Plan. With no recent deer management in the park, preferred taller plants were rare, while less palatable species were more common. The monitoring report is available on our website.

Whanganui

We have carried out wild goat control in Whanganui National Park for more than a decade. We recently monitored both Whanganui National Park and Waitōtara Forest Conservation Area to check how effective our control efforts have been. We looked at areas with and without wild goat control.

Across all sites, introduced wild animals are still causing significant damage, and we have not seen any improvement, even where wild goat control is in place. This could be because of limited resources or because wild red deer are increasing in areas with fewer goats. Our monitoring shows the ongoing presence and impact of introduced wild animals, despite more than 10 years of wild goat control.

Next year, thanks to funding from the International Visitor Levy, we will significantly increase our control and monitoring efforts.

Figure 2 shows the sites monitored in 2024/25

Working with others

Wild animals roam freely across both public and private land and we need to work with others to manage populations.

Evaluating incentivised venison recovery against DOC-led wild deer management

We ran a trial in Fiordland to compare two approaches to managing wild deer: one using financial incentives to encourage commercial venison recovery, and the other using standard DOC-led control without meat recovery.

The aim was to find out whether paying venison processors $80 per deer would lead to higher removal rates, specifically more than 1.5 deer per square kilometre, a level known to help protect sensitive alpine plants.

The trial showed, however, that the incentivised method removed fewer deer – just 0.34 deer per square kilometre – compared with DOC's own efforts, which achieved a much higher rate of 5.72 deer per square kilometre, and at a lower cost of $63 per deer.

Although the trial only ran for half a season, it appears the low demand from venison processors was the main reason for the poor results. Other factors – such as carcass weight, terrain accessibility and the logistical challenges of recovery in remote areas –also influence the viability and effectiveness of commercial recovery operations in achieving a conservation benefit. This suggests that financial incentives alone aren't enough to reach the deer removal rates needed to protect Fiordland's alpine ecosystems.

Wild deer recovery in Fiordland National Park.
Photo: Wayne Curran

One of the last remaining sika stags caught on a trail camera, April 2025. *Photo: Northland Regional Council*

Preserving Northland's unique biodiversity: Working towards a deer-free future

Wild deer have historically been absent from Northland, but illegal releases and farm escapes have led to small populations becoming established.

In 2024, in partnership with Northland Regional Council and iwi, we began operations to remove all sika deer from Russell Forest in the Bay of Islands. This forest is home to native trees like kauri and tōtara, and special wildlife like the North Island brown kiwi.

Using a combination of hunting teams, helicopters, drones and 75 cameras, we successfully removed 64 deer. Only two male deer (stags) and one female (hind) are thought to be left, and we'll target them in 2025/26. Next year, we'll carry out scat surveys (check for deer droppings) to confirm the forest is clear.

We also surveyed the Kai Iwi Lakes area extensively using thermal cameras and ground searches and found no signs of wild deer. The small fallow deer population previously illegally released there is considered to have been removed, and the area is now clear of deer.

To stop deer from spreading throughout Auckland and into Northland, we've taken the following proactive steps:

- removed a small group of red deer near the Auckland border
- investigated a possible sika deer sighting on the northern side of the Waikato River (DNA tests confirmed no sika deer were present).

A small population of sika deer exists at Port Waikato, but crossing to the northern side of the Waikato River would have marked a significant development in their spread.

What's next in 2025/26

- Working with iwi, landowners and a forestry company in Kaipara to stop fallow deer from moving south and threatening the Waitākere Ranges.
- Protecting the Hunua Ranges, including Vinings and Mangatawhiri scenic reserves, by continuing work in the Hunua Buffer zone.

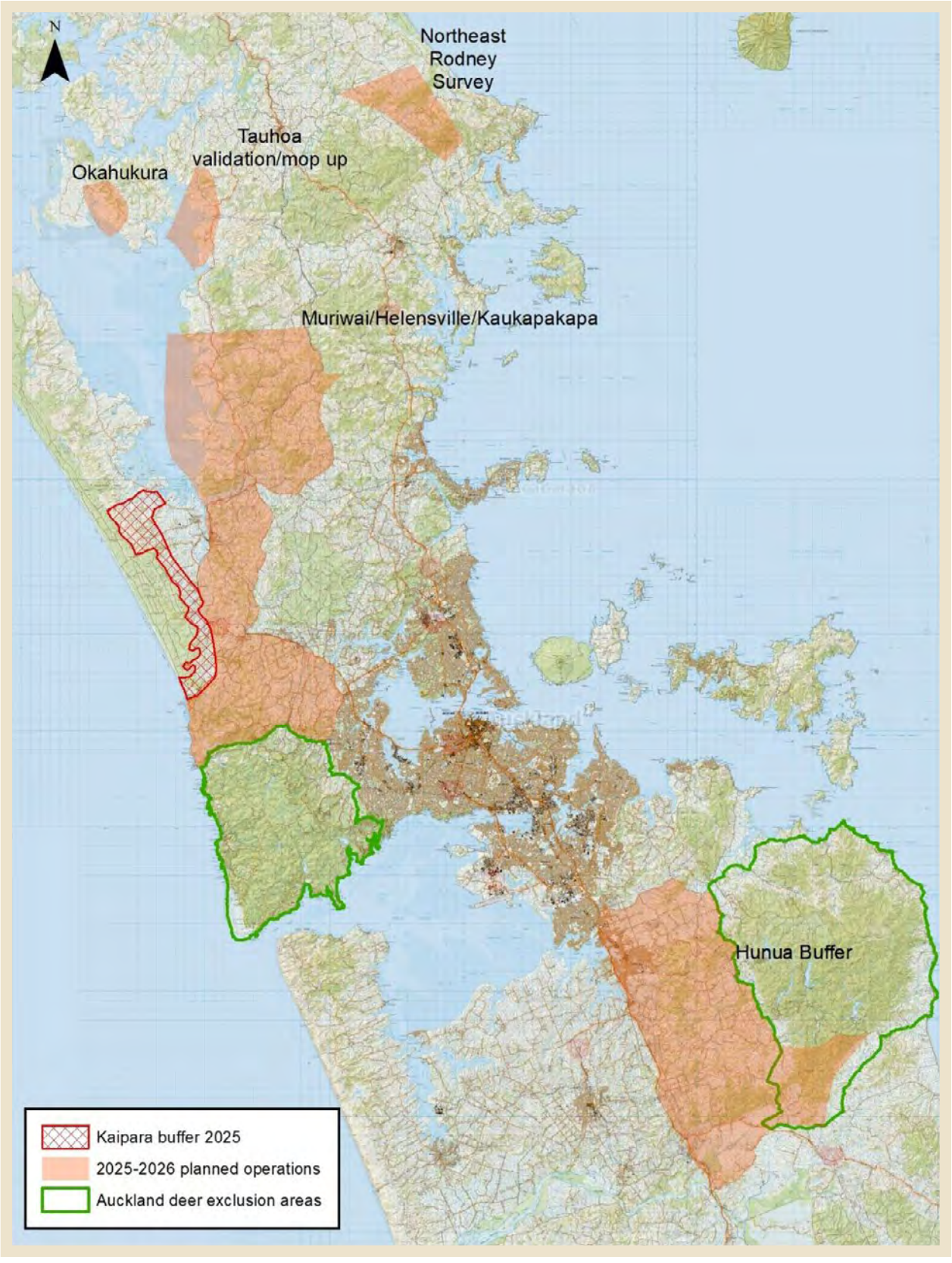


Figure 3: Planned operations for 2025/26 to stop deer from spreading throughout Auckland and into Northland.

Some of the lucky winners from the 2023 competition on a wild goat hunt with NZ Hunter Adventures. *Photo: NZ Hunter Adventures*

Building relationships to reduce introduced browsers: National Wild Goat Hunting Competition

Wild goat control is vital for protecting the habitats of threatened species and boosting forest resilience to climate change.

To tackle fast-breeding goat populations, we worked with the New Zealand Deerstalkers Association, supported by Hunting & Fishing New Zealand, Te Tari Pūreke Firearms Safety Authority and Federated Farmers, to run the second National Wild Goat Hunting Competition.

In 2024, 12,935 goats were removed from across the country – an increase of 2,800 from 2023 – with 800 participants.

The campaign's digital reach was significant: ads were seen over 2.5 million times, generating more than 93,000 clicks. NZ Hunter Adventures filmed past winners of the hunt, which attracted 23,000 views. Media coverage included 22 stories and a wild goat hunt with the Minister for Hunting and Fishing. Most notably, 64% of entrants said they're now more likely to hunt goats because of the competition.

The next annual competition will take place between 1 August and 26 November 2025.

Collaborative deer management in Kaimanawa and Kaweka forest parks

The Sika Foundation was granted funding in 2022 through the Jobs for Nature programme to run deer management and conservation projects over 3 years. One main project was an adaptive deer management and research programme in the Kaimanawa and Kaweka forest parks.

Led by the Sika Foundation and supported by additional funding from DOC, the project ran until early 2025. We will continue funding the work in 2025/26.

In some areas, the forest is poor due to several factors, including a natural canopy dieback. Over-population of wild deer is also contributing to the prevention of forest regeneration. The project aims to improve forest health across the Kaimanawa Forest Park, with an initial focus in the 15,000-hectare Remote Experience Zone (REZ).

In 2024, professional thermally assisted aerial hunting removed 317 deer, with 14 deer donated for meat to local iwi and foodbanks. Since 2022, the project has removed 1,089 wild deer from the REZ. Vegetation and deer density monitoring were remeasured in February and March 2025 to track the response in the habitat from management

Sika Foundation team carrying out monitoring. *Photo: Sika Foundation*

Wild deer detected on the thermally assisted aerial operation. *Photo: Sika Foundation*

Exploring herds of special interest

Sika and wapiti deer herds

The Sika Foundation and Fiordland Wapiti Foundation, supported by the New Zealand Game Animal Council, sent proposals to the Minister for Hunting and Fishing to consider designating Herds of Special Interest (HOSI).

Under the Game Animal Council Act 2013, the Minister initiated formal processes to explore the potential designation of two HOSI:

- wapiti deer in Fiordland National Park
- sika deer in Kaimanawa and Kaweka forest parks.

Currently, no HOSI have been designated in New Zealand. A HOSI is a formally recognised herd of game animals on public conservation land, managed to support hunting outcomes while safeguarding conservation values.

On the Minister's behalf, we have been working with our Treaty partners and agencies, including the New Zealand Conservation Authority, conservation boards, New Zealand Game Animal Council, regional councils and the Ministry for Primary Industries, on the potential HOSI. We have begun drafting HOSI herd management plans.

Herd management plans must align with New Zealand's conservation framework, with hunting outcomes focused on maintaining lower numbers of healthier animals.

Public consultation will be held on the draft herd management plans, and no decisions will be made until that is complete.

For more information, please visit our website.

Hunting in Kaweka Forest Park. *Photo: David Owen*

What’s next?

In 2025/26, we will continue to enhance the management of introduced browsing animals by:

- integrating our planning into DOC’s new biodiversity prioritisation system (BioInvest), with a continued focus on containing range spread
- confirming the success of the sika deer removal in Russell Forest, Northland
- finalising the wild deer management plan for Ruahine Forest Park with iwi/hapū, stakeholders and the community
- sharing results from our on-the-ground monitoring to assess the impact our management efforts are having
- continuing to facilitate the National Coordination Group and share progress in the development of a national data system and research plan
- continuing to hold the National Wild Goat Hunting Competition in partnership with the New Zealand Deerstalkers Association
- continuing to support the priorities of the Minister for Hunting and Fishing, including potential HOSI designations.

These actions will help improve our efficiency and management of introduced browsing animals and support our broader conservation goals.