

5.3 RURU HE TANGI NA TE RURU CONVERSATIONS IN THE NIGHT

RANGI MAHUTA (WAIKATO),
CHERI VAN SCHRAVENDIJK-GOODMAN
(TE ATIHAUNUI A PAPĀRANGI, NGĀTI APA,
NGĀTI RANGI), AND HURIWAI PAKI
(NGĀI TUHOE)

Ngā mihi

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Tangi ā te ruru, kei te hokihoki mai e, E whakawherowhero i te pūtahitanga....

**The cry of the morepork keeps coming back to me,
It is hooting out there where the paths meet....**

Beginning lyrics to waiata "Te Hokinga Mai"; composed by Te Taite Cooper and Father Mariu (1986)

ABOUT THE RURU

The ruru (morepork, *Ninox novae-zelandiae*) is our only surviving native owl.¹ At an average height of 29 cm, ruru are recognised by their predominantly brown and white speckled plumage, and wide, round yellow-green coloured eyes. They live in densely forested areas, both native and exotic, using older trees like pines, macrocarpa, gums, and our larger native podocarps (i.e. tōtara, kahikatea, miro, mataī) as important nesting and roosting areas. Their preferred food items are insects such as the pūriri (moth), but occasionally include:

- small birds such as tauhou (silver eye)
- small mammals such as pekapeka (native bat) and rodents (rats and mice).

¹ Another of our owls, whēkau (the laughing or white-faced owl; *Sceloglaux albifacies*) is believed to have become extinct somewhere between 1910 and 1940.

A lot of the thinking in this paper has come from personal experience and discussions with our own whānau. We are currently beginning a journey exploring how we can help our ruru, and the ideas explored in this paper would not have been possible without our whānau and tribal members at the Poukai of three Waikato marae – Ngā Tai e Rua, Maurea and Waingarō. Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou.

– Ngā mihi Rangi, Cheri, and Huriwai

RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE RURU

The relationship of our people with the ruru is a complex one borne out of a deeply spiritual connection that places the bird as both a messenger (usually with sombre news), and as an important kaitiaki (guardians) for hapū (subtribes) and iwi (tribes) across the motu (country). Tangata whenua (indigenous people) across the world have a similar relationship with their own owls, highlighting the owl family (Strigiformes) as a universally important one for many first nations people.

Reasons why the owl is revered (and sometimes feared) universally by indigenous groups are just as complex as the relationships themselves. But it could be argued that some of its characteristics distinguish it from other native birds:

- the physical presence of the bird – big wide eyes glowing in the dark
- its haunting 'kou-kou' call
- its silent movement through the bush – owls do not make the same beating wing sounds as other birds
- it normally appears only at night.

As with all our native animals and plants, the ruru has an important role to play in the development and evolution of our culture as sources of inspiration for:

- the sounds, rhythms, and inflections we make in our waiata (songs), karanga (ceremonial call), and reo (language)
- the ways in which we graphically depict our stories and histories in carvings, weaving, and more contemporary artwork forms
- the ways in which we move, as is seen in wero (challenge) and other forms of mau rākau (wielding of weapons) and kapa haka (Māori performing group, including poi (poi dance)).

It is because of this dynamic and multi-layered relationship that ruru are important species for riparian and wetland restoration. This relates primarily to the way in which they are considered and accommodated within the broader goals of freshwater restoration as they are largely considered a terrestrial/bush bird.

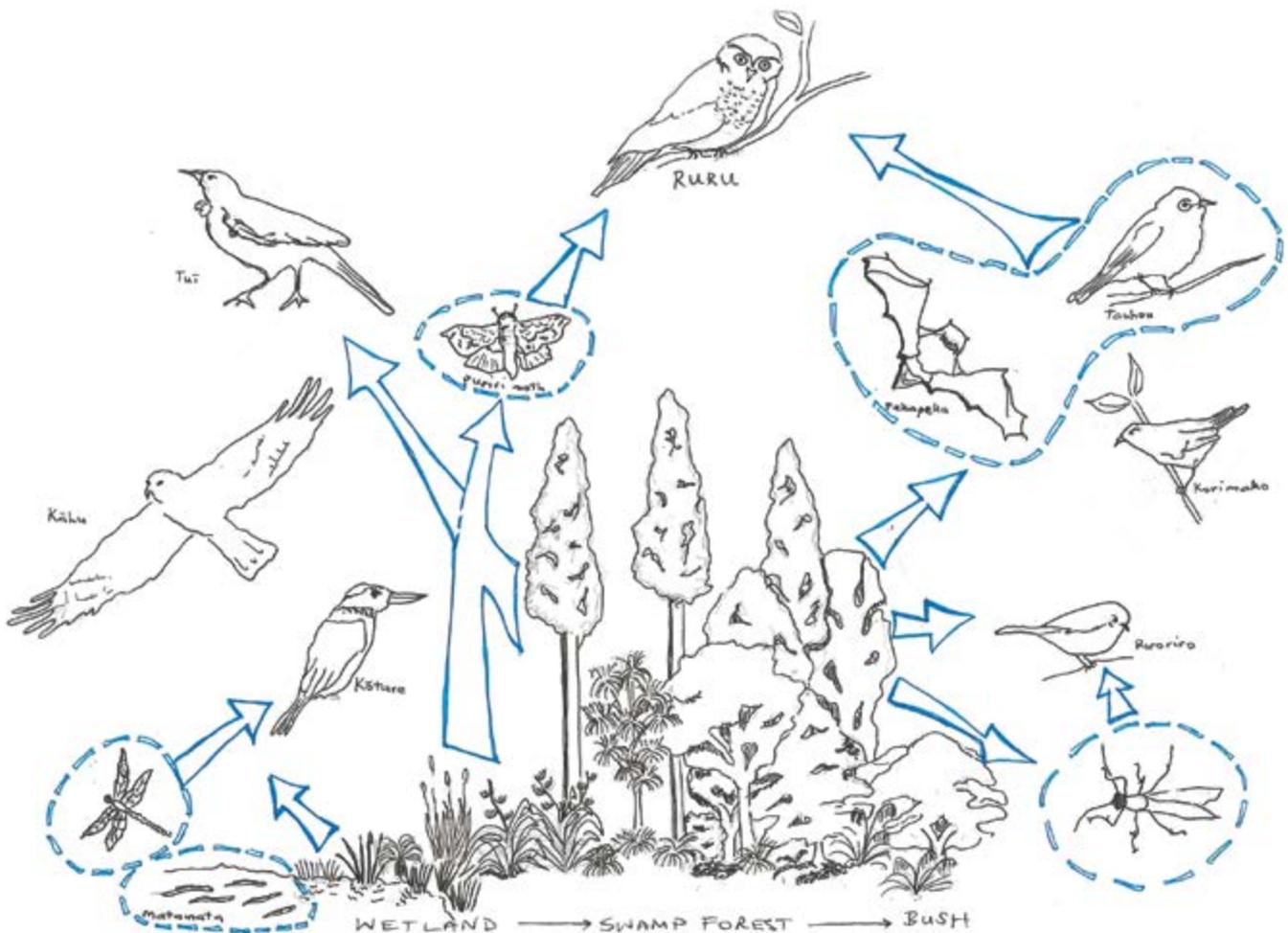
HOW ARE RURU CONNECTED TO WETLAND RESTORATION?

Ruru are not your typical repo (wetland) bird like the matuku (Australasian bittern), kōtare (sacred kingfisher), and pūweto (spotless crakes). They are a 'forest dwelling bird', implying a disconnection with the immediate wetland environment. However, the tall trees and dense scrub associated with swamp forests surrounding wetlands are recognised by many whānau (families) as important habitats for ruru. Kōrero (conversation) shared with the authors also note that te reo o te repo (the language of the wetland) include their distinctive night calls. The seemingly disparate relationship between ruru and repo is, therefore, challenged by the relationships recognised by tangata whenua between the bird and repo species.

- Information shared from tribal members in the lower Waikato highlight whakapapa (connection) links between ruru and specific trees connected with pūriri moth that are found in the shrub layer and sub-canopy of lower Waikato swamp forests.

- These trees are connected directly to the wider habitat considered by kaumātua (elders) as important for matamata (whitebait) spawning.
- These same areas of spawning habitat are recognised as important habitat for matuku, kōtare, kahu (swamp harrier), long-fin tuna (freshwater eel), and a wide range of important weaving plants including harakeke (NZ flax), kuta/ngāwhā (giant spike sedge), and wīwī (rushes).
- Returning to the surrounding swamp forest we see connections to tuī (also connected to the harakeke as a food source), korimako (makomako/bellbird), riroriro (grey warbler), tauhou, pekapeka, and insects.
- And finally, returning full cycle to a predator of tauhou, pekapeka, and insects, the ruru. It is important to note that ruru whakapapa can also move in the opposite direction towards mountain ranges, into gullies, and along the coast.

It is not difficult then to understand why it is a challenge for whānau to separate freshwater, from wetlands, from (dry) land – the connections know no boundaries like those prescribed and often enforced through statute and policy.



WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP OUR RURU?

- **Consider carefully before felling/removing big rākau (trees) near your marae (meeting house), whare (home), and whenua (land).**

These trees may potentially be nesting and roosting sites for the birds. Monitor the tree for any ruru activity, particularly around breeding and nesting season (Sept–May).

- **Kōrero (speak) with kaumātua (elders) and whānau (family) about plants or trees that may connect the ruru to wetland animals and fish.**

Are there particular native plants that could attract insects and so increase that food source for the ruru? What can be planted as roosting-spots around the wetland? It is important that these trees and plants are factored appropriately into plans for riparian and swamp forest restoration.

- **Always accommodate mammalian control in sites where you are trying to encourage the return of birds like ruru (and including matuku and pūweto).**

Cats, stoats, ferrets, possums, and rats are important predators of the birds, their chicks, and their eggs. Because ruru sometimes nest and forage on the ground, this makes the risk of predation greater.



A preferred food of the ruru is the pekapeka/native bat.
Photo: Colin O'Donnell

- **Protect swamp forest remnants and, where possible, enhance them with additional buffer plantings.**

The more habitat available to them, the greater the potential for breeding and nesting successfully.

- **Learn as much as you can about what they mean to your hapū/iwi.**

This is not only an exercise in finding solutions to enhance ruru's health and wellbeing, but also about protecting your own unique dialects (mita), names, and mātauranga (knowledge) about the ruru and its whakapapa.



Ruru, lino cut print from 'He Putea Kōrero' kit. Artwork: Te Maari Gardiner

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Note: If you are having problems with the hyperlinks below, try copying and pasting the web address into your browser search bar.

There are few publications available specifically about the ruru and its relationship with tangata whenua (indigenous people). However, the following websites provide useful and important ecological information. They are a good starting point for any restoration, protection, and enhancement work you may want to initiate.

Useful websites

DOC: <http://doc.govt.nz/nature/native-animals/birds/birds-a-z/morepork-ruru>
www.doc.govt.nz/nature/native-animals/birds/birds-a-z/morepork-ruru/stories

Communities working to save their ruru:
www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/ourchangingworld/audio/201785989/citizen-science-giving-ruru-a-helping-hand

NZ Birds Online: <http://nzbirdsonline.org.nz/species/morepork>

Wingspan: www.wingspan.co.nz/birds_of_preymorepork_native_owl.html

This website also shares information about some traditional relationships tangata whenua have with ruru:

www.wingspan.co.nz/maori_and_birds_of_preymorepork.html

www.wingspan.co.nz/maori_and_raptor_weather_forecasts.html

www.wingspan.co.nz/maori_mythology_and_the_rurumorepork.html

Image related credit

Ruru lino print: He Putea Kōrero [kit] is a collection of picture cards and verses of New Zealand native animals illustrating the Māori alphabet to help extend the use of Te Reo Māori in Kohanga Reo, Kura Kaupapa Māori, Bi-lingual Units in schools and Māori language at all levels. Artwork by Te Maari Gardiner and Gabrielle Belz. Published by Whanganui [N.Z.]: Te Puna Publications, 1989. Format: 15 picture cards and 1 verse booklet in envelope 32 cm x 32 cm.

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