



Above: Volunteers all kitted up ahead of landing on Kidney Island. While ringing the Cobb's wrens, the welfare of the birds is always taken into consideration. Trained bird ringers ensure that minimal stress is caused Cobb's wren is released from transportation box
Below: FC team on Top Island preparing to release birds. Cobb's wren rests on rock. Volunteers making the most of the day on Top Island



First trial translocation of the Cobb's wren between two islands

FALKLANDS Conservation recently undertook the first trial translocation of Cobb's wren between two islands.

Cobb's wren is an endemic bird species, meaning that it only occurs in the Falklands and nowhere else in the world. However, its distribution around the Islands is now much reduced and highly fragmented since the first arrival of rats and mice with early seafarers. It is now limited to just offshore rat and mouse-free islands that are often widely separated from each other.

Since 2001, a program of island rat eradication has been conducted by Island Land Care, Falklands Conservation, SAFER and several other passionate landowners with the aim of improving our native island ecosystems and increasing the area of habitat suitable for Cobb's wrens.

A total of 65 islands that have been cleared of rats remain rat-free in 2024. Whilst significant conservation gains have been made, with rebounding passerine and coastal bird populations up to four times higher than before, many have not been repopulated by Cobb's wren due to the extended distance birds would have to fly to arrive from the nearest remnant populations.

In many cases, birds must first fly over mainland areas with rats and cats, and some islands with Cobb's wren are over 60km from the nearest other rodent-free island. As such it is considered that the potential benefits from rat eradication are not being fully achieved without the successful recolonisation by Cobb's wren back into its former habitat where it once thrived.

With assisted reintroduction,

birds are caught on one island and carefully transported to another. This movement mimics the natural dispersal of juveniles in autumn but can occur over a greater distance than they would fly and ensures birds arrive in a safe rat-free environment with high quality coastal habitat – rather than just disperse to the mainland where they would perish. It also ensures that they arrive in sufficient numbers to establish breeding pairs that will give a sustainable population.

The current work was a trial to prove the concept and establish the best way to capture and move birds to minimise any stress. Two sites close to Stanley were chosen so that the sites can be monitored for both success and any temporary impacts.

Kidney Island, at the entrance to Berkeley Sound, is a rodent-free near pristine tussac island and a National Nature Reserve with a healthy population of Cobb's wren and acted as the donor island.

Top Island in Port William was cleared of rats 24 years ago in 2001. Several recent visits by Falklands Conservation, Island LandCare and Greenhounds (as recently as June 2024) had not seen any birds, indicating that in all this time Cobb's wren had failed to re-establish by natural dispersal from Kidney Island, the nearest population, just seven km away. Top Island was subsequently selected as the release site and could give a potential gain of at least 25 pairs based on average coastal densities elsewhere.

The first step was a walked survey of the Kidney Island shoreline to establish a baseline count

and determine how many birds could be sustainably trapped and moved. In total, 97 Cobb's wren were counted which would be a significant underestimate as not all the island was surveyed. From the known survival and breeding success of wren species, this determined that up to 20 birds could be extracted without impacting the donor population in the long-term.

In the end, we were conservative and caught just seven juvenile birds. Birds were trapped, measured and ringed and individually placed in their own specially built transfer box with bedding, food and water. Once a sufficient number of birds had been caught, the boxes were transferred across to Top Island for release. This meant that no birds were held for longer than four hours (with the average at two hours 20 minutes). The birds also had time to explore their new surroundings on Top Island, feed and shelter before dark.

The translocation was a success with seven birds moved, and all happily exited the boxes on Top Island, looking right, left and right again before flitting away to the nearest tussac bog with no ill effects. The released birds, all with rings, will be monitored with repeat visits.

We would like to have said that we had moved the first Cobb's Wren to be on Top Island in 25 years but amazingly as we released the last of our translocated birds a single un-ringed juvenile was observed, possibly attracted by the calls of our new arrivals. This prompted a full intensive survey of the island a few days later.

Ten additional birds were found

after a full day walking the coastline and interior tussac, including a clear family group of adult and juveniles. It seems that at least one pair had been on the island before – but had been there at such a low density that they had remained unnoticed during previous visits and only become more noticeable after this year's broods had fledged and numbers multiplied. Nevertheless, our additions will still assist in building up the population and increase genetic diversity and it is great that Top Island has an increasingly viable Cobb's wren population.

Now that the concept and techniques have been proven, it is hoped in the future that such reintroductions can now be undertaken to some of the larger island groups that have been cleared, such as the Arch Islands that were successfully cleared of rats in 2008 by Island LandCare. In such cases, birds could be reintroduced to one island in the group and as numbers build, they would then move and recolonise the others in the group naturally. This "seeding" of a population gives a multiplying conservation gain for the initial effort. If extended to the main island groups cleared of rats, it could give at least an additional 1,557 ha of habitat and 76 km of coastline for Cobb's wren, perhaps up to a 20% increase in their population and occurrence.

We want to thank everyone that helped, Will Miles who came down as a volunteer from the UK to provide instruction in handling and ringing, Sullivan Shipping for the launch, the various helpers who assisted and Darwin Plus who provide UK Government funding for the project.

Falklands Conservation