## THE KIWIS OF KERIKERI

The owners of a luxury New Zealand golf resort are helping to preserve an endangered species. Lee Mylne reports from the North Island



THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN

The owners of a luxury New Zealand golf resort are helping to preserve an endangered species. Lee Mylne reports from the North Island

AN eerie call in the night: New Zealand's endangered symbol, the kiwi, is afoot. In the dark silence, a small group of eager visitors to its habitat hold their breath. A cough or movement can be enough to send this flightless bird fleeing into the scrub.

Not far from one of NZ's most northerly golf courses, resort guests have swapped their clubs for dimmed red torches as they anticipate a glimpse of this elusive nocturnal bird.

An hour before sunset, the group of four -- no more are allowed at one time -- leave the luxury Kauri Cliffs golf lodge on Northland's east coast and head into the nearby Puketi Forest for a four-hour tour on which there are no guarantees of a sighting.

There is, however, a much better chance of spotting a kiwi these days. Ironically, the development of the lodge has given the kiwi a more positive future as the owners work with environmentalists to preserve and increase local populations of the bird.

Kauri Cliffs has 14 kiwis living in a replanted gully that accounts for many of the 250,000 native trees planted on the property. Environmentalist Greg Blunden, who manages the National Trust's Aroha Island Ecological Centre near **Kerikeri**, about 30 minutes' drive from Kauri Cliffs, believes the resort has been a boon for the North Island brown kiwi.

`There was even a sighting near the lodge itself, when staff were starting their early morning shift and one ran across the path in front of them," says Blunden. He told them to ``call Julian" -- Julian Robertson, that is, Kauri Cliffs's owner, a New York financier who made billions on Wall Street and discovered this corner of paradise while holidaying in NZ with his family.

Kauri Cliffs is at the end of an unsealed road in a remote area at the top of the North Island, near Matauri Bay, with cliff-top sea views, secluded coves and a rugged coast, set against a backdrop of native bushland.

Guests stay in eight timber duplex cottages tucked into bushland near the main building, looking east across the golf course to the ocean. The kauri trees lining the path to the accommodation are part of the extensive replanting program, and cost about \$NZ20,000 (\$17,400) each. It was there that the kiwi sighting took place, giving strength to the hope these highly territorial birds are spreading their wings -- figuratively speaking. Blunden's kiwi excursion includes about 90 minutes in the bush. ``We walk through the kauri forest, and listen and look -- while there are no guarantees we will see kiwi, we always hear them."

Blunden describes Kauri Cliffs as a ``mainland island" for the remnant population of kiwis that survive there and praises Robertson and his wife, Josie, for their work: ``What the Robertsons have done ensures that the place will blossom in ecological terms in the next 20 years."

Blunden explains there is little government funding for such work. "It is up to individual landowners to get on with it and that is what the Robertsons are doing," he says. Part of that commitment is their involvement in the New Zealand Kiwi Foundation, which was set up three years ago to manage the National Trust's 6070ha Rangitane Scenic Reserve. At last count -- about 10 years ago -- there were about 70,000 kiwis in the wild, but the population is declining. Birds live as long as 40 years, but the survival rate for newborn chicks is only 1 per cent to 5per cent. Northland is one of the few areas in NZ where there are still significant numbers, with about 57 per cent of the country's kiwi population.

"There is more biodiversity in Northland than in any other place in NZ -- and more kiwi," says Blunden. "But there is no question that the overall population is still declining, and huge areas of the crown estate are not managed."

Checklist

Four-hour nocturnal kiwi excursions from Kauri Cliffs cost \$NZ350 (\$306) for a group of four. Two-hour guided kiwi walks from the Aroha Island Ecological Centre cost \$NZ60 for four (less if you are staying overnight). More: www.kauricliffs.com; www.aroha.net.nz.