

# DOGS ON THE SCENT



by Maria Gill

Rua finds a pāteke – a bird that lives nowhere but New Zealand. Photo: Pete Graham

Dogs are a big threat to native birds – but the Department of Conservation (DOC) has found a way to turn some dogs into native-bird guardians!

DOC runs a Conservation Dog Programme – training dogs and their human handlers to do important work.

There are three kinds of DOC dog:

- **Protected-species conservation dogs** sniff out native birds. Their handler helps the birds by checking they're okay, banding them, or moving them to a safer place.
- **Predator detection dogs** track down native-bird-killing predators like weasels, stoats, ferrets, and rats. The predators are got rid of.
- **Hunting dogs** track down animals that destroy our forest – like deer, goats, and pigs.

## Rua and Tama

### Protected-species conservation dogs

Pete Graham is a DOC dog handler and has two dogs: Rua, who is about to retire, and dog-in-training Tama.



Pete and Rua relax. Rua is a Hungarian Vizsla, a calm and gentle breed – perfect for this work. Photo: Miriam Ritchie

The dogs are 'pointers'. This means that when they find what they're tracking, they stay still and stare at it. They don't retrieve it like some dog breeds.

This is important when tracking kiwi – because these birds have very weak breastbones. If a dog picks a kiwi up – gently or not – they crush the kiwi's chest and it dies.

Still, to keep the birds safe – even from these highly trained dogs – the dogs must wear a muzzle when they're tracking. Pete says, 'Once the muzzle goes on, Rua knows he's about to track kiwi or pāteke (brown teal).'

LOOK →

There's a friend.  
And it's in trouble!  
Hold on – I'll help!

16

WILD

## Pai and Piri

### Predator detection dogs

Carol Nanning is the handler for five-year-old Pai and pup Piri. She takes the dogs onto pest-free islands when a rat has been seen. Pai also checks people's bags before they sail to islands in the Hauraki Gulf.

### Pups in training

Pete's dog Rua and Carol's dog Pai are certified conservation dogs. They've completed the intense DOC training programme. The two younger dogs – Tama and Piri – are halfway through their training.

### Dog nose best!

When looking for kiwi, Pete uses a tracking device – but that only shows that he is close. Rua's excellent smelling skills then lead him right to where the bird is hiding.

Once, Pete was lying in the grass looking for a kiwi in the bush on his left. Rua waited until he was called, nudged Pete, as if to say, 'What are you doing?' – and pointed to the right.

Pete found the bird exactly where Rua pointed.

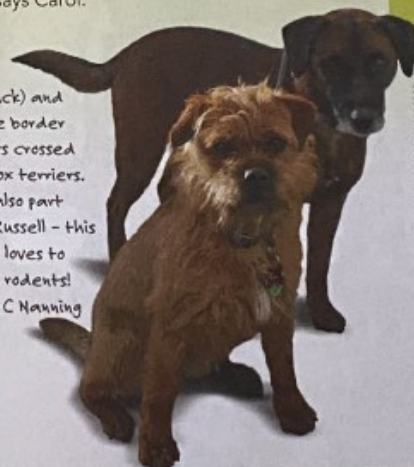
### Doggy rewards

For Rua and Pai, finding the creature they're looking for is enough reward for them. Their handlers pat them and tell them how clever they are.

Pai got plenty of pats recently when he caught a Norway rat at Otorohanga Park. The rat had managed to escape a trap, then killed three tuatara and two kākāriki! It took Pai only 10 minutes to find that rat!

'Everyone wanted to pat Pai after that,' says Carol.

Pai (back) and Piri are border terriers crossed with fox terriers. Pai is also part Jack Russell – this breed loves to chase rodents! Photo: C Nanning



Carol and Pai inspect a ferry – making sure no sneaky predators stow away and arrive on a pest-free island. Photo: A Polkanov

Carol poses with Piri (far left), Pai (far right), and their dad Jak – a retired predator detection dog. Photo: C Nanning



## How you can help

Carol says we can help Pai and other conservation dogs by zipping up our bags immediately after packing them whenever we're about to visit a pest-free area – and then keeping them tightly zipped while we're there. This is so no sneaky pests like mice can stow away with us.

Pete says it's interesting that 'we're training kiwi's biggest enemy – dogs – to help kiwi!'

Maria Gill is the award-winning author of many non-fiction books for children.  
[www.mariagill.co.nz](http://www.mariagill.co.nz)

What's happened?  
I've never seen a kina as squashed as you!

I'm not a kina. I'm a sand dollar. I'm meant to look like this. Get lost!



17