

Whio Forever

Annual Report July 2022 – June 2023



Department of
Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai



A vulnerable taonga species

Introducing whio

Whio/blue ducks are one of Aotearoa New Zealand's ancient taonga (treasures) that are found nowhere else in the world. Whio are one of only four duck species that live all year round on clean, fast-flowing streams and rivers. They are an indicator species, which means where you find whio, you'll find clean waterways.

Whio under threat

Predators

Predators such as stoats, ferrets, cats, rats and possums are great threats to whio, especially when nesting and during the late summer moult period when they can't fly and are even more vulnerable to being attacked.

Weather

Climate-related events, such as flooding, have an impact on whio habitats and hinder predator trapping and whio monitoring efforts. With an estimated total population of 3,000, the species faces a very real risk of becoming extinct.



Call:

The adult male whio makes a distinctive "fee-oh, fee-oh" call, which gave the bird its name. The female whio makes a rattly growling noise.



Eyes:

Whio have very distinctive yellow eyes that face forward, just like a human's eyes, so they can spot and catch their insect prey.



Camouflage:

The blue-grey feathers of whio give the bird the 'blue' in its English name, but those feathers also have a very important function – camouflage. They help the whio blend into its river environment and hide from predators.



Bill:

The bill of the whio is like no other. It has black rubbery lips at its tip that work like bumper bars, protecting the bill as the bird bounces over rocks searching for food. The bill also has filters like those of a baleen whale that help it suck up aquatic invertebrates from the water.



Travel:

Whio are nimble movers, with large, webbed feet that act like flippers in the water. Even newly hatched whio ducklings have the large feet to help them paddle against the fast current. These unique feet can also fold down like an umbrella to reduce drag when the bird is moving quickly downstream.



Size:

The adult male whio weighs in at about 1,000–1,300 grams (that's about the same weight as 2–3 blocks of butter), with the female slightly lighter at 800–1,000 grams.

Partnering to protect nature so who thrive

In 2011, the Department of Conservation (DOC) and Genesis Energy established the Whoio Forever Recovery Programme to enhance the survival of whoio nationwide. Through the partnership, the programme has established eight security sites and supported several recovery sites nationwide.

The partnership involves managing and maintaining traps along 709 km of streams across ten sites. This crucial work is carried out by DOC rangers, private and public organisations, and a number of local community partners. These groups clear and rebait traps, monitor the progress of the whoio in the area, and carry out annual surveys that help keep track of whoio numbers.

Security sites

These are high-priority areas that are intensively managed to protect a representative population of whoio. At each of the eight sites, the goal is to have at least 50 pairs of whoio.

Recovery sites

These help to maintain whoio across their natural range. These sites are maintained through community efforts and DOC initiatives.



Photos clockwise from top left: Tahu Taylor-Koolen, Sarah Wills, Jonathan Astin, Herb Christophers, Rebecca Davies, Lyn Hassell, Norbert Rupp.
 *No whoio numbers were recovered as the annual survey was not conducted due to flooding

National results

A tough year for whoio

While our goal is a year-on-year increase in the number of whoio breeding pairs, in the past two years there's been a decrease in the numbers of breeding pairs in our security sites.

Recent extreme weather events, including flooding and the impacts of Cyclone Gabrielle, have increasingly affected whoio habitats. Weather events also limit the ability to protect and monitor these sites, putting the vulnerability of whoio at a higher risk.

694 PROTECTED BREEDING PAIRS

32,142 TRAPS
Up from 21,307 in 2022

1,631 km OF RIVER PROTECTED IN 2023

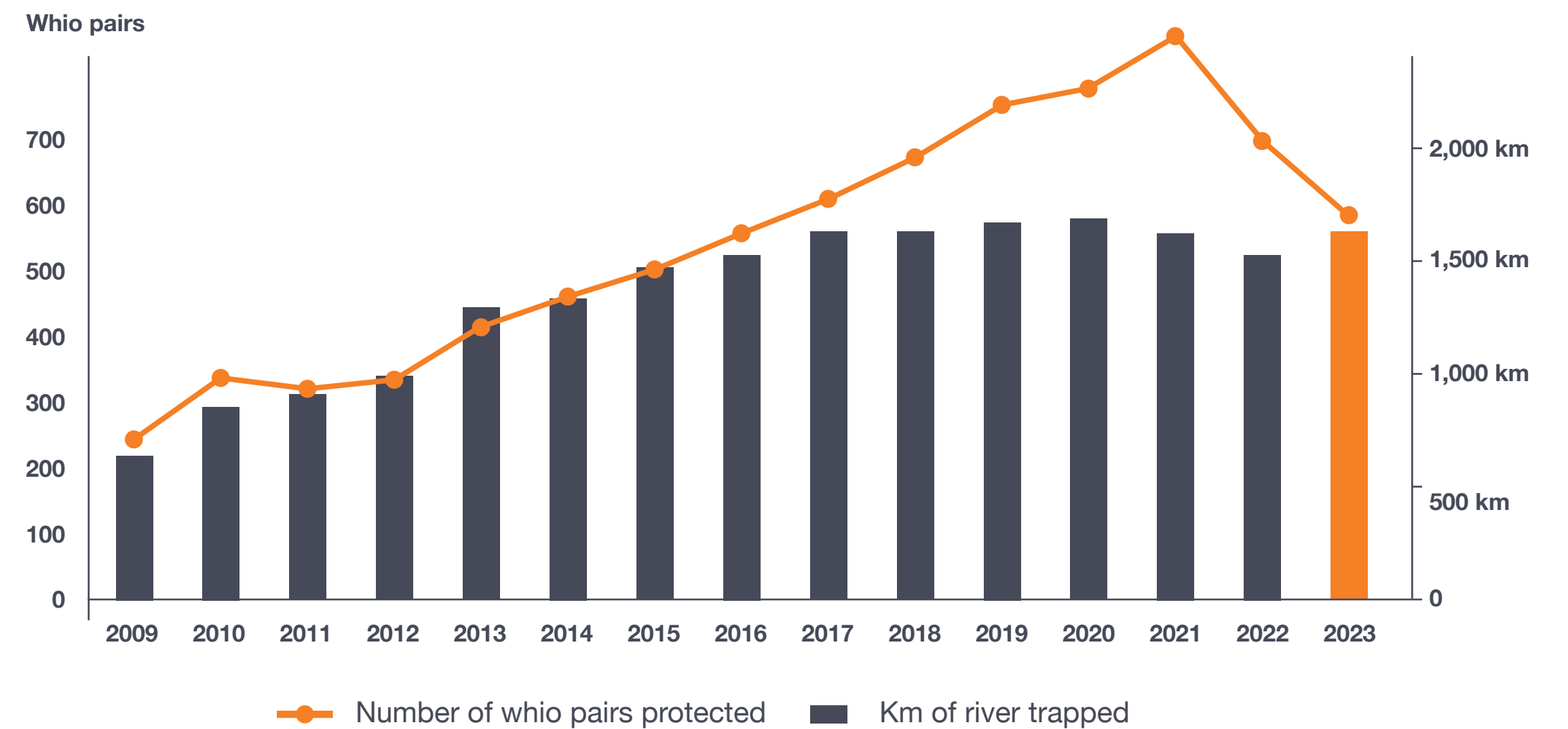


Whoio ranger. Photo: Luke Easton

Good news for Central Southern Alps

While the overall numbers of whoio declined, some security sites experienced some more positive outcomes. The Central Southern Alps security site comprises several valleys – with whoio numbers holding steady in the Styx, Arahura and Kawhaka valleys.

The Deception valley has had a significant increase in pair numbers due to juveniles being released each year since 2020. It is believed there are now more than 8 pairs of breeding whoio pairs in Deception valley, compared to 3 pairs before 2020.



Raising awareness and engagement

‘Look out for whio’ campaign

Our main campaign ‘Look out for whio’ ran for 3 weeks from 21 March – 12 April 2023.

- ▶ The goal was to reach individuals who are actively engaged with nature and are likely to participate in activities that involve interaction with whio and their habitats.
- ▶ The aim was to deepen their connection with whio and foster a sense of giving back to nature.
- ▶ We had a huge growth in followers on Whio Forever social channels, which was one of the key metrics for measuring success.
- ▶ Awareness of the Whio Forever partnership also peaked in March at 28%, an increase from 16% the year before.

Genesis Energy paid channels

198,926 IMPRESSIONS

106,667 PEOPLE REACHED

DOC paid channels

272,000 IMPRESSIONS

105,000 PEOPLE REACHED

Whio Forever social channels

645+ NEW FOLLOWERS AND LIKES ON FACEBOOK

50+ NEW INSTAGRAM FOLLOWERS

140,500 PEOPLE REACHED

Online engagement May 2022 – May 2023

The Whio Forever social channels have shown consistent growth. We offer followers frequent updates and information about whio through our social channels, to strengthen the audience’s connection to whio and their environment.

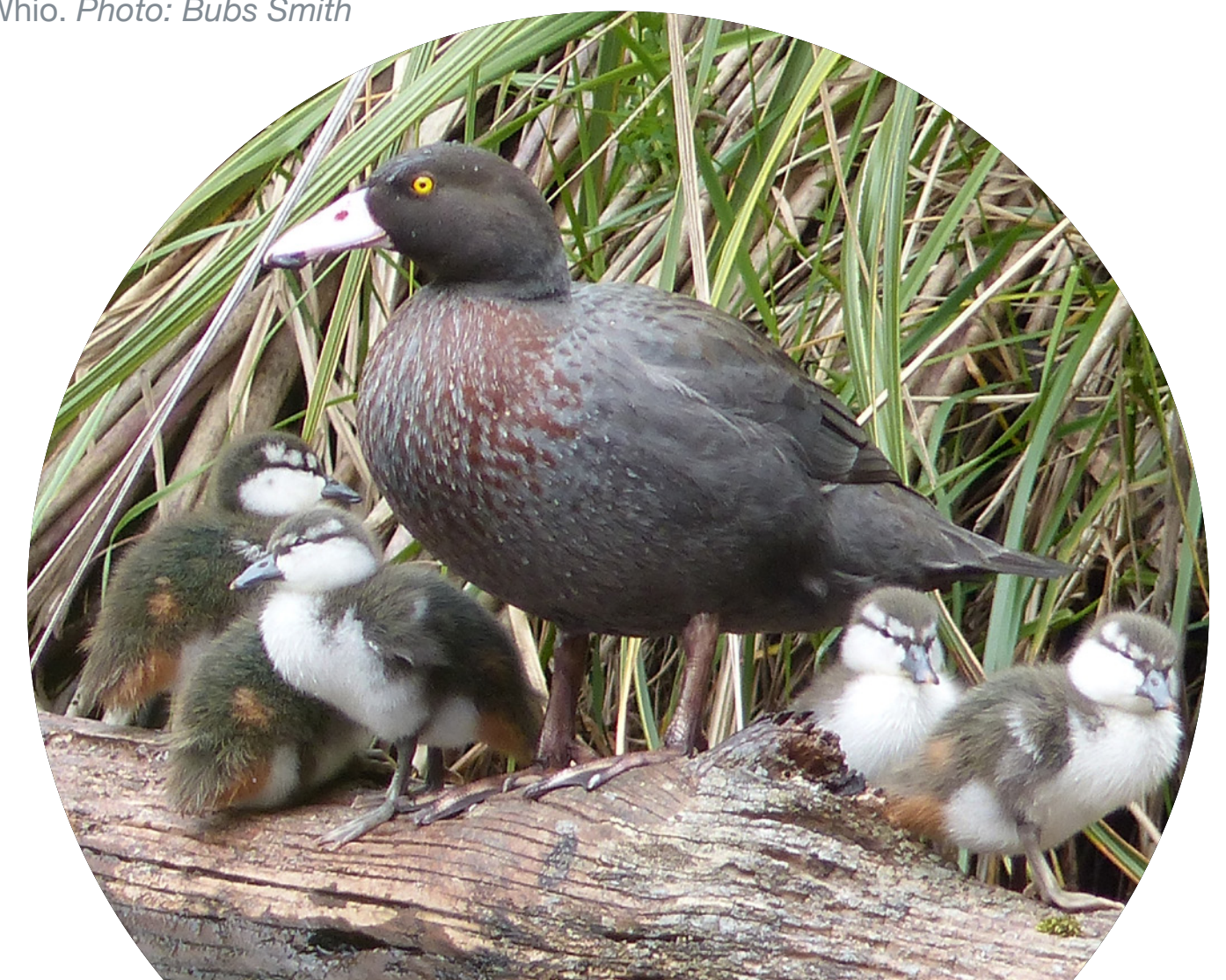
We saw:

 followers increase by 23.6% to 4,800.

 followers increase by 167 to 1,200.

There were 163 whio-related stories in the media, a 5% decrease on 2022.

Whio. Photo: Bubs Smith



Looking ahead

Partnership objectives

In September 2023 DOC and Genesis agreed to extend the Whio Forever partnership for a further 3 years to:

- ▶ fully protect whio at security sites
- ▶ inspire New Zealanders to understand, engage in and participate in whio protection through a marketing, communications and advocacy programme

Other objectives that will be achieved through the partnership delivery are:

- ▶ contributing to the delivery of monitoring, surveying, practitioner's workshops and best practice tools
- ▶ contributing to securing whio at priority recovery sites
- ▶ working alongside the Whio Recovery Group and others to leverage opportunities through the whio breed-for-release programme, DOC's National Predator Control Programme, Jobs for Nature, Predator Free 2050 and other initiatives

Long-term strategy

The next 3-year-term also provides us with the opportunity to develop a new longer-term strategy to secure whio in the wild.

This will include assessing the impacts of climate change on whio habitats and linking the work back to the objectives and outcomes of Te Mana o te Taiao – Aotearoa New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy.

Collaboration, co-design and partnership are required to deliver the best outcomes for nature, and we will play our part to ensure we connect as many people and organisations as we can to the cause.

Learn more about Whio Forever at www.doc.govt.nz/whioforever



Whio. Photo: Sebastian Doak