

## SHORT NOTE

### Stewart Island robins (*Petroica australis rakiura*) fly home after transfer to Ulva Island

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The Stewart Island robin (*Petroica australis rakiura*) is 1 of 3 subspecies of the New Zealand robin, and occupies only Stewart Island and the surrounding smaller islands (Heather & Robertson 1996). At present, robins on Stewart Island are confined to manuka (*Leptospermum scoparium*) scrub forest in the Freshwater and Rakeahua river flats and monitoring has indicated that the population is steadily declining. The absence of robins from mature podocarp forest may result from higher predator densities in these areas (Greer 2000).

In September 2000, just before the breeding season, 16 robins were caught in the Freshwater Flats and transferred by boat to Ulva Island in Paterson Inlet (Fig. 1). Ulva Island was cleared of introduced predators in 1996 and represents natural unmodified podocarp forest dominated by rata (*Metrosideros umbellata*), rimu (*Dactyidium cupressinum*), and kamahi (*Weinmannia racemosa*). The object of the transfer was to introduce robins to a former habitat, from which they had been extirpated by predators some time after 1900.

One month after the transfer, we found 14 of the 16 birds released (88%), but only 9 of these were still on Ulva Island (56%). The other 5 birds (4 ♂♂; 1 ♀) were found back at the source location on Stewart Island. The straight-line distance from the point of release to the point of capture is c.20 km, including stretches of open water (Fig. 1). Robins

may have followed the coastline, which would make the total journey nearer 25 km.

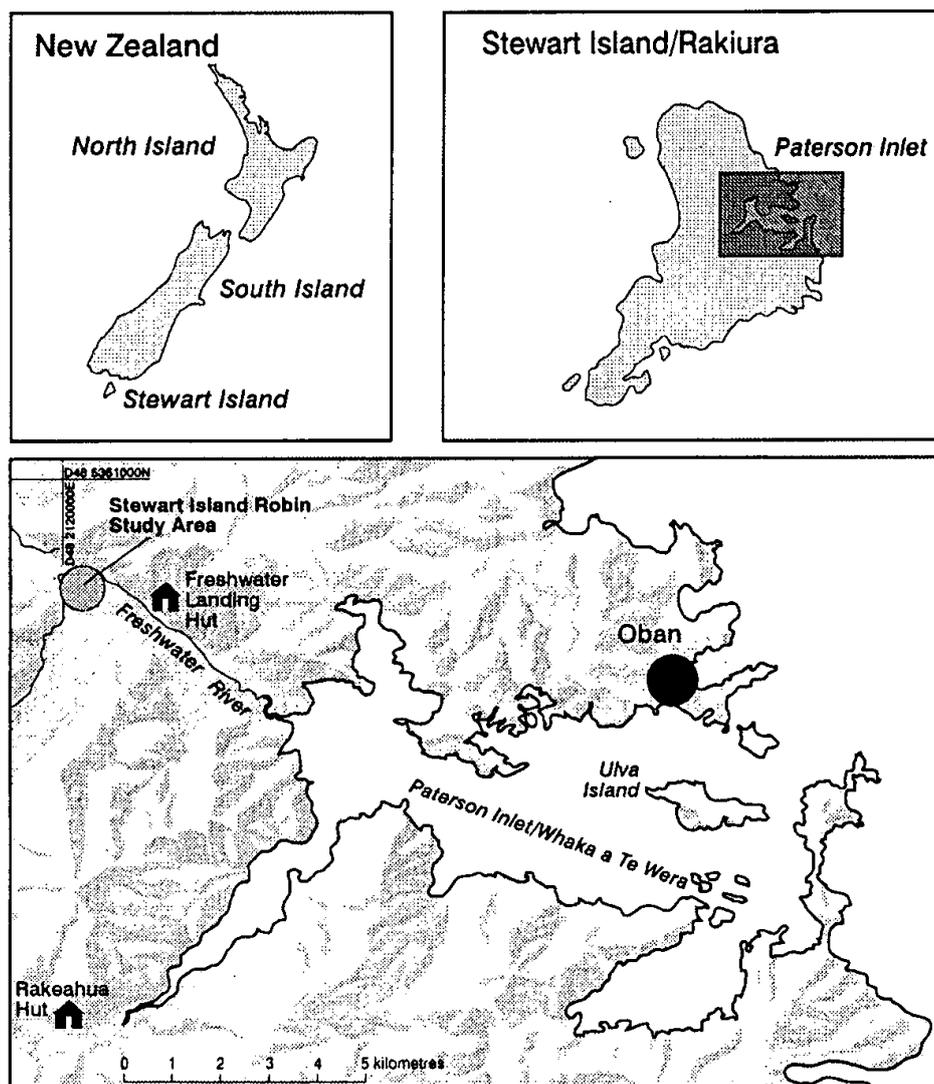
Two males had flown back before the initial survey (< 40 days after transfer), 1 male arrived back 55 days and another 70 days after transfer. All 4 were found at their original territories, indicating good navigational and homing abilities. The 1 female that flew back was seen on Ulva Island as late as 86 days after transfer (6 December 2000), more than 500 m away from the point of release. This female was found in the Freshwater Flats 12 days later (18 December 2000), paired with an unbanded male in a new territory. Her previous partner was breeding with another female.

Four more birds (1 ♂, 3 ♀♀), that were seen several times after the transfer, disappeared from Ulva Island in the last week of October. Their whereabouts is unknown, as they have not been found on Ulva Island or in the Freshwater Flats. More than the documented 5 birds might have attempted to fly back to the capture area. If returning females had found new partners that were not being monitored, then they would have been very difficult to find. Some birds may have died during attempts to return.

New Zealand robins have been transferred to former habitat on at least 20 occasions throughout New Zealand, including 13 reintroductions to islands (Armstrong 2000). In none of these translocations has any bird been known to return to the source area

That robins can fly back to established territories, over distances of >20 km, including at least 800 m of open water, should be considered in future translocations. Transfer of birds after the breeding season may reduce the likelihood of attempted returns. Juveniles without established territories are probably less likely to return.

Fig. 1 Location of Ulva Island and the Freshwater Flats study area. Study area contains source population of Stewart Island robins (*Petroica australis rakiura*) transferred to Ulva Island.



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