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## Old Blue

In the 1970s Don Merton devised the successful recovery programme for the Chatham Island black robin.



In 1973 only 18 black robins were found on Little Mangere Island so the entire species was relocated on Mangere Island. There, the population dropped to just five birds and one of these was "Old Blue". This aged female black robin in the Chatham Islands saved her species from extinction.

Don told Old Blue's story in a guest editorial for The New Zealand Journal of Ecology.

So who was "Old Blue" and what was so special about this nondescript little lady that she became a household name and national hero, that her death should be announced by a cabinet minister and be mentioned in newspapers around the world and that a plaque should be erected in her honour?

Old Blue, the only surviving productive female from 1979-1981 was hatched on Little Mangere Island in about 1970. Her life was studded with remarkable and fortuitous events—so much so that it's hard to believe that there wasn't a little "divine intervention" involved.

### It's remarkable that:

- Old Blue ever hatched and reached adulthood on Little Mangere Island, at a time when the habitat was fast diminishing and degrading and few chicks survived - only one other bird from that era survived to breed.
- Doug Flack, (a researcher from the US) and the team discovered the plight of the last few robins in time.
- In spite of rough seas and huge cliffs, all seven survivors (including the last two females) were successfully transferred to Big Mangere in 1976-77.
- All birds, including Old Blue, survived the transfer and surf landings.
- Old Blue changed mates in 1978 and paired with what proved to be the only successful breeding male surviving at that time - "Old Yellow". With the exception of one and two year old birds, pair-bonds are generally maintained for life.

## And we were lucky that:

- She lived so incredibly long and was productive to the end. An average robin life-span is 5 to 6 years. Old Blue began her productive life at about 9 years!
- She survived a massive avalanche in 1977 which demolished about a third of the Mangere bush. Two of the seven robins weren't so lucky!
- We happened to visit the island in 1979 when Old Yellow was severely crippled by his leg-band, and were able to remove the band. Old Yellow was one of only two males alive then and proved to be the only viable one!
- I had fostered goldfinch nestlings to my grandmother's canary when I was a child. 35 years on, I based the rescue strategy on the same childhood prank. It dramatically boosted production in a species that, unaided, lacked the ability to recover quickly due to its naturally low productivity.
- Old Blue and Old Yellow allowed us to take their eggs and that cross-fostering, (untried with free-living birds) proved a practical and effective means of boosting productivity.
- That genetic problems associated with prolonged, close inbreeding did not arise.

Finally, in her last days "Old Blue" (with our help) evaded a high level proposal to take and preserve her as a stuffed specimen!



Old Blue was a delight to work with and seemed to enter into the spirit of the rescue operation. She lived at least 13 years, considerably longer than any robin since then and more than twice the lifespan for most robins. We thought each year must surely be her last. She died late in 1983 or early in 1984.

She and her mate Old Yellow were the only effective breeders from 1979 to 1981 and she raised 11 chicks once she got going. All the black robins alive today are descended from Old Blue and Old Yellow. They unquestionably saved their species from extinction.

The black robin is probably the most intensely inbred wild bird species and the only avian species living in the wild where the parentage and lineage of every individual is known and can be traced to a common ancestor.

**Don Merton 1992**