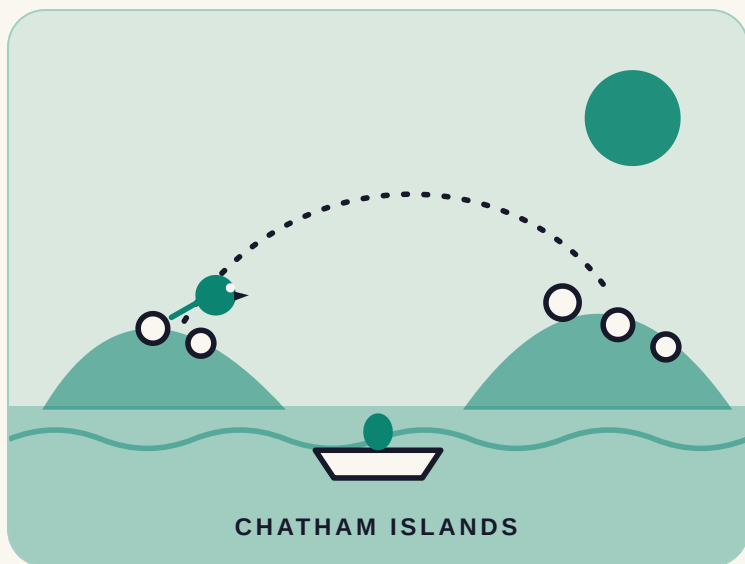




NEW ZEALAND

How five little birds came back

In 1980, only five black robins were left in the world. One female and a bold plan saved the species.

WHERE Chatham Islands

WHO Don Merton and the wildlife team who saved the black robin

WHEN 1976 to 2022

4 min read

The story

The Chatham Islands lie far out in the Pacific, east of New Zealand. A small bird called the black robin lives only there. Rats and cats wiped it out on most of its islands.

By the 1970s, the last few robins lived on a tiny rock called Little Mangere. The trees there were dying. In 1976, only seven robins were left. Wildlife officers moved them to a bigger island, Mangere, where more than 100,000 trees had been planted.

It was not enough. By 1980, only five robins were left. Only one pair could breed. The female was called Old Blue. Her mate was Old Yellow.

A bold plan

Don Merton, from the New Zealand Wildlife Service, led the rescue. Black robins lay just two eggs at a time. He proposed a new idea. The team would take the eggs and put them in another bird's nest. This is called cross-fostering.

The robins would then lay again. One pair could raise two families in one season.

At first, the foster parents were warblers. They hatched the eggs. But they could not raise the chicks past ten days. In 1981, the team found the answer. Tomtits, close

cousins of the robins, could raise the chicks until they could live on their own.

The methods deployed to save Black Robin and other New Zealand species have provided inspiration across the Pacific region.

ALEX BERRYMAN, BIRDLIFE, 2023

5

birds left in 1980

130

birds by 1991

~300

birds today

A boat in the roaring forties

The tomtits lived on another island, 15 kilometres away. So the team carried eggs there by boat. They built a portable incubator to keep the eggs warm. Strong winds often stopped the trips, and no helicopter was based on the islands.

Local fishermen made every trip possible. Over the years, the team moved about 40 eggs, 10 chicks and 25 other birds between the islands. They lost none.

In 1983, the robins got a new home on South East Island. It was a much bigger island, with room to grow.

By 1985, there were 38 robins. By 1991, about 130. Today there are around 300. Every one of them comes from Old Blue.

In 2022, the black robin moved from “Endangered” to “Vulnerable” on the world list of threatened species. It is not safe yet. Rats or cats could still reach the islands. And the birds are all closely related.

How it unfolded

- **1976** Seven robins are moved to Mangere Island.
- **1980** Only five robins are left.
- **1981** Tomtits show they can raise robin chicks.
- **1983** Robins settle on South East Island.
- **2022** The robin moves down to Vulnerable on the world list.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

Most rescues guard what is left. This one asked the birds to raise two families a year. It also took many hands, from wildlife officers to local fishermen.

Ordinary people helped too. Members of the group Forest & Bird paid for trees through an “adopt a tree” appeal. Each helper did one small part. Together, the parts made a rescue.

OUR TAKE

A small act, moving an egg, changed the future of a whole species.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1 Test the small step first

The warblers could not raise the chicks. The team kept looking until tomtits worked.

Try this: Run one small test of your plan before you spend big money or time.

2 Use many pairs of hands

Wildlife officers, donors and fishermen each did a part.

Try this: List who else your project needs, and ask one of them for help today.

3 Give your plan room to grow

On a tiny island the robins could not grow. On a bigger island they did.

Try this: Name one limit that holds your work back, and find one way to widen it.

4 Plan for the long run

Trees were planted in the 1970s. The robin moved down the danger list only in 2022.

Try this: Pick one goal that needs years, and write what you will do for it this month.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

Five birds were enough to begin again.

Sources

Forest & Bird (New Zealand)

[Hope in action](#)

BirdLife International

[Black is back: Next chapter in one of conservation's great recovery stories](#)

Watchbird (American Federation of Aviculture)

[The Chatham Island Black Robin: How the world's most endangered bird was saved from extinction, by Don Merton](#)

Fact-check note: Sources agree on the core story and differ in detail. Don Merton's own account (Watchbird, written around 1991) says he led the project; Forest & Bird says the rescue was up to Brian Bell and a team that included Merton. Forest & Bird names warblers and tomtits as foster parents; Merton says warblers failed after ten days and tits worked from 1981; BirdLife says tomtits. The story follows Merton. The trees planted on Mangere are given as 120,000 (Merton, Forest & Bird) or over 100,000 (BirdLife), so the story says more than 100,000. The figures of 38 robins in 1985 (Forest & Bird) and 130 in 1991 (Merton) each come from one source. About 300 robins today is from Forest & Bird and BirdLife (both 2023); other counts exist. Te Ara's biography of Merton could not be opened. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.