

# Missing skink

*Oligosoma homalonotum*

**PREDATOR-FREE** fencing isn't just for the birds; the future of the chevron skink is now looking considerably brighter with the erection of the 2 km fence now sealing off a 230 ha headland of Great Barrier Island. (The project includes several properties, and was spearheaded by local landowner Tony Bouzaid.)

The chevron skink, or *Oligosoma homalonotum*, is one of New Zealand's rarest lizards, and its longest, measuring up to 30 cm from the nose to the tip of the tail. It has stripes, or chevrons, down its back and will grunt or squeak if bothered.

First described in 1906, it was only sighted twice over the following 60 years, leading scientists to conclude it had been "lost". This was partly due to a mix up of museum labels that identified it as having been found on Flat Island in the Mokohinau Islands group, which should have read Great Barrier Island.

A single adult was found on Little Barrier Island in 1991, but despite intensive searches only one other has been found there since. They are now thought to survive only on Little Barrier Island, a small captive population at Auckland Zoo, and on Great Barrier Island where they've now been found in over 20 spots. ■



ACTUAL-SIZE SKINK. PHOTOGRAPH: BEN BARR

## HAURAKI GULF



Little Barrier Island



# You dirty rat

*Rattus norvegicus*

**RATS ARE FORMIDABLE**, athletic colonisers. You may have heard of Razza, the notorious Norway rat deliberately let loose on a rat-free island near Stewart Island as part of a study of rat movements led by Rachel Fewster. The rat had been released by PhD student James Russell, who then ended up losing a season of field-work when the radio-tagged creature promptly disappeared, only found several months later on a nearby island, having swum 400 m to get there. Razza was written about in *Nature*, newspapers all over the world and was sympathetically portrayed in Witi Ihimaera's *The Amazing Adventures of Razza the Rat*.

Meanwhile Fewster and her colleagues continued their research, more recently turning their attentions to Pearl Island, also off Stewart Island, which had three species of rats (Norway, ship and kiore) until they were simultaneously eliminated in August 2005. Then, nine months later, both Norway and ship rats reappeared.

DOC didn't know whether the rats had reinvaded, or whether they hadn't been successfully eradicated in the first place. The latter would have been bad news indeed, suggesting DOC's eradication programmes weren't working as well as they should. However, through genetic analysis of a few stray rat tails left over from previous studies, Fewster and co could confirm the rats came from Stewart Island, probably on their own mettle.

Fewster's research on rat DNA adds ballast to growing consensus that the best way to keep rat-free islands that way is to ensure the surrounding islands are also rat-free, that conservation efforts should be aimed at clusters of islands rather than individuals. This approach is exemplified by the Motu Kaikoura Trust, which plans to eliminate rats on 26 islands along the west coast of Great Barrier in the Hauraki Gulf. By the time of printing—assuming all went to plan—the project would have finished its aerial drop of rat bait on all of them. ■

36 { Number of islands from which Norway rats have been eradicated

GEOGRAPHY