



# Possum trapping in areas with ground-dwelling birds

Information for possum trappers

East Coast Bay of Plenty Conservancy

August 2012



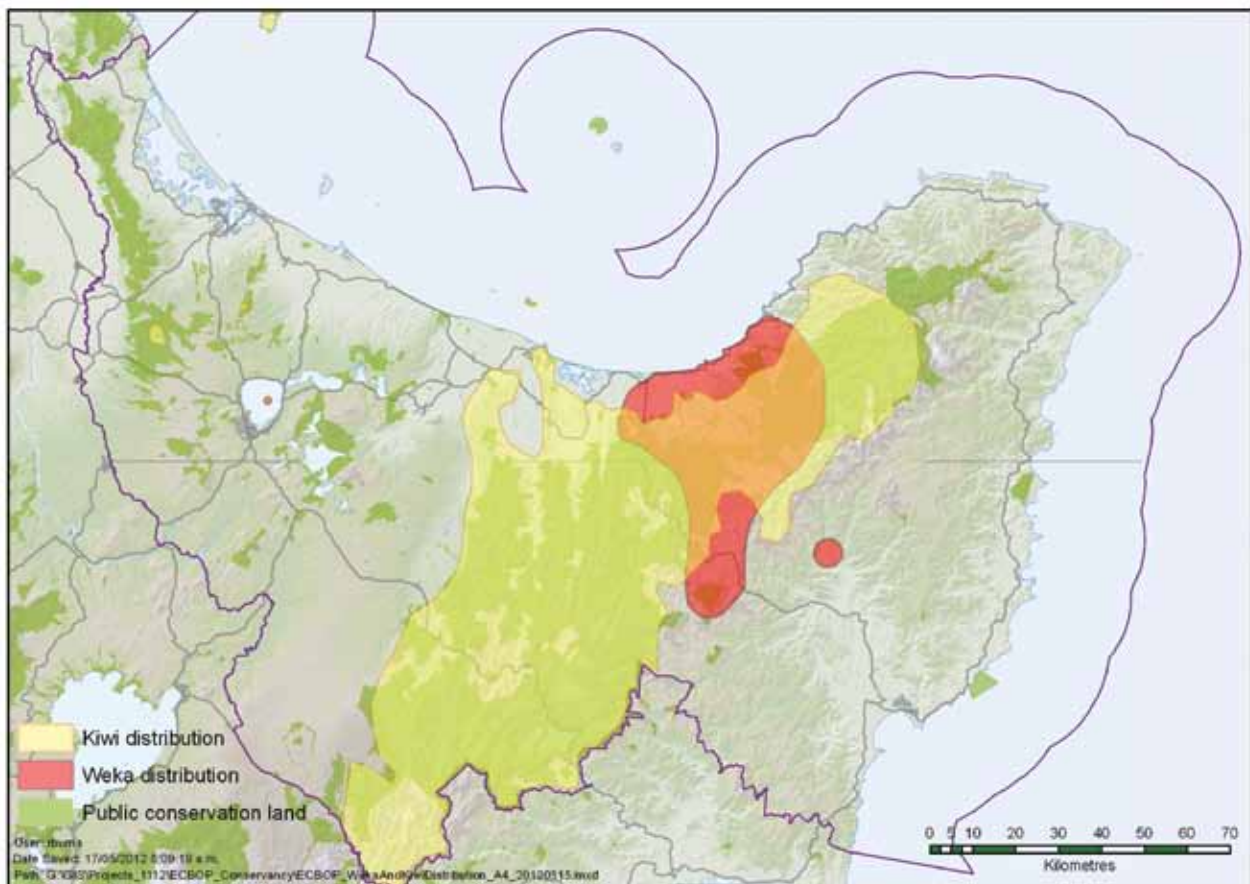
# Ground-dwelling birds within East Coast Bay of Plenty Conservancy

There are large populations of flightless ground birds (Eastern brown kiwi and North Island weka) within the East Coast Bay of Plenty Conservancy (see map). While possum trappers can make a valuable contribution to the control of possum pests on public conservation land, their trapping activities may also have the unfortunate side-effect of harming or even killing these birds.

Kiwi are vulnerable to standing on traps placed on or near the ground; weka are also vulnerable to such traps, but they also readily run up logs and so can stand on any traps set on ramps. Birds caught by leg-hold traps are usually badly injured and often die as a result of their wounds.

For this reason, the Department of Conservation (DOC) requires all possum trappers to **raise all traps to at least 35 cm** vertical height above the ground within designated ground bird areas of the East Coast Bay of Plenty Conservancy. In weka areas, no ramp sets can be used.

Failure to comply will directly threaten any ground-dwelling birds present and also affect the chance of maintaining a population in this area in the long-term. When necessary, serious actions may be used to enforce this regulation, e.g. revoking permits, confiscating traps and taking out court prosecutions.



Current distribution of kiwi and weka within the East Coast Bay of Plenty Conservancy. (Note: weka can colonise areas rapidly, so the area indicated and the trapping restrictions that therefore apply are subject to change at any time).

# Effects of leg-hold traps on ground birds

Leg-hold traps have both a high initial striking force and a high sustained clamping force when they catch an animal. Both kiwi and weka can be severely injured or killed by these forces.

Even if birds survive the initial shock of capture, the injuries are often so severe that they are unable to forage effectively (and may starve), or have limited mobility and become more vulnerable to predation. If there are no obvious injuries it is still a legal requirement that all birds are checked by a trained vet, as many injuries are not easily identified (e.g. kiwi commonly suffer from hip dislocation as they struggle to free themselves). They may also develop painful and potentially lethal infections that need to be clinically treated.

Rehabilitation of birds is not only traumatic but prolonged and expensive, and often involves surgery to pin bones together. If the injuries are too severe, the only option is to euthanise.

**It is much better to prevent any bird captures in the first place.**

Both kiwi and weka are fighting for their very survival against a variety of introduced predators (mainly stoats, dogs, ferrets, cats and weasels). DOC, other agencies, iwi and community groups have placed a huge amount of financial, physical and emotional investment into protecting these birds at a few intensively managed sites. Targeting possums by ground trapping can have a significant impact on the populations of these birds, compromising much of this good work.

If leg-hold traps are raised to at least 35 cm using one of the methods outlined below, the risk of trapping kiwi or weka will be greatly reduced, giving these species a chance to thrive for many years to come within the East Coast and Bay of Plenty.



Weka caught in a ground-set leg-hold trap. (Photo: courtesy of Nga Uri o te Ngahere Trust.)



A



B



C



D

Injuries to four different kiwi from ground-set leg-hold traps.

**A:** Exposed tendon (light colour) in amputated toe.

**B:** Trap-chain leg injuries sustained in an attempt to escape a leg-hold trap overnight.

**C:** X-ray scan showing broken lower leg bones from a leg-hold trap.

**D:** Exposed tibia bone from a severe dislocation and fracture with the left leg completely rotated, caused through escape attempts from a leg-hold trap.

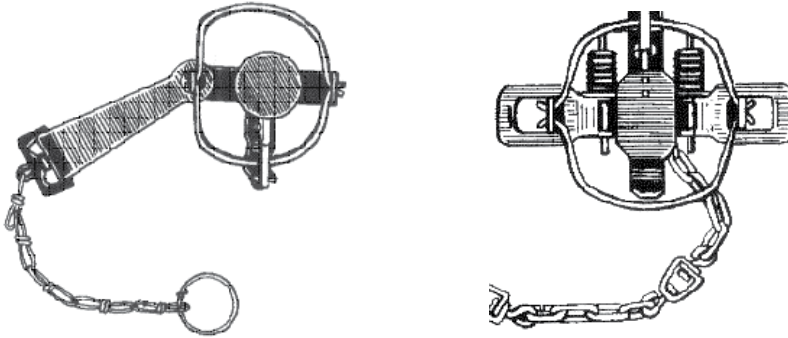
Both C and D proved to be fatal injuries, with A and B requiring prolonged care.

(Photos: Kiwi Encounter.)



# Types of leg-hold traps

There are two general types of leg-hold traps: long-spring and coil-spring traps.



Long-spring trap (left) and double coiled-spring trap (right) From: NPCA website

Spring-coiled traps are usually (though not always) suitable for being raised using the methods described below. However long-spring traps have no currently approved safe methods for raising them to ensure they cannot catch ground birds.

Fortunately spring-coiled traps are by far the most common type of leg-hold trap in New Zealand. If you have invested in long-spring traps, you will need to demonstrate you can raise these in a bird-safe manner.

## How to raise your traps safely

### Permitted traps

The methods below are a guide and work well with most coil-spring traps available from many manufacturers and distributors (e.g. Victor, Bushmaster, Dukes and Sleepy Creek). Long-spring traps are more difficult to safely raise, and usually require a substantial ramp specifically designed for that trap type. If you insist on using long-spring traps in ground-bird areas, you will need to demonstrate you have a robust method—see the note below. No ramps can be used in weka areas.

Many different methods are used to raise possum traps. The following broadly summarises the three currently acceptable approaches.

[**Note 1:** If you have another method or variation on these methods that you believe also ensures the complete safety of ground birds, you **must** have this approved by DOC and this altered condition noted on your permit. You may also need to allow a reasonable period of time for any variation to be assessed by DOC staff before you can expect to receive your permit and start to use this method. There may also be a higher reporting requirement when using any alternative method.]

All methods require:

- Hammer
- Staples to secure trap chain to tree
- Lure (wheat flour-based, often with icing sugar added)

## Method 1: Nails

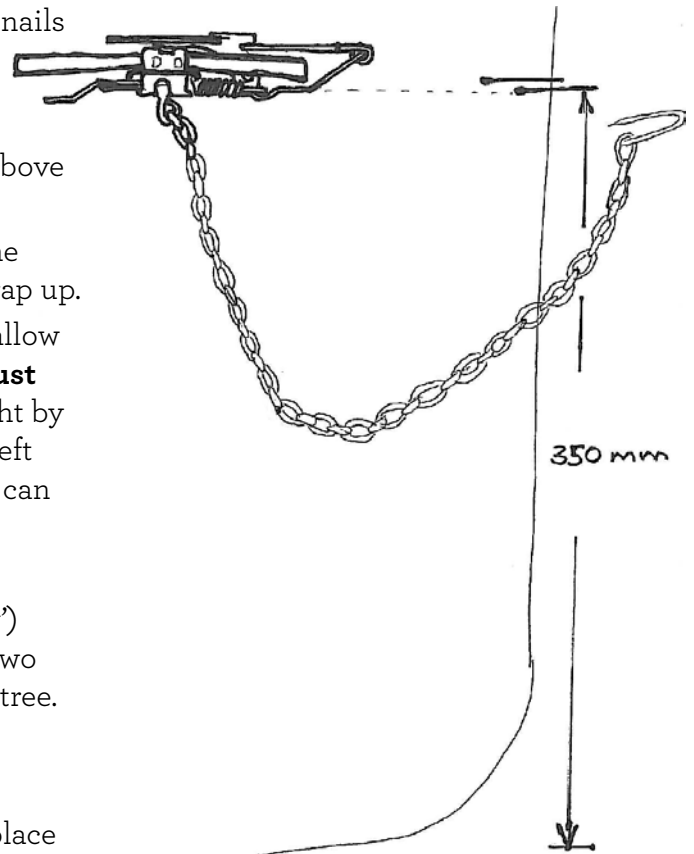
### Special equipment needed

- 75–100 mm bright steel or galvanised jolt-head nails (2 per trap).

### Method

- Hammer two nails into the tree at least 35 cm above the ground, approx. 4 cm apart horizontally.
- Leave enough nail showing (5–7 cm) to allow the springs to slip over and comfortably hold the trap up.
- Staple chain onto tree. Leave enough chain to allow the possum to rest on the ground (the chain **must** be long enough so that when a possum is caught by either front or back foot and falls, it cannot be left suspended on the chain above the ground, and can rest on the ground).
- Lure/blaze as per normal above the trap.
- Set the trap. Face the trap with the trigger ('dog') against the tree and slide the springs over the two nails until the trap is resting firmly against the tree.

[**Note 2:** Setting the trap last retains the maximum amount of lure on the tree where you want it. Hammering or blazing after the trap is set and in place results in lure falling onto the trap itself. Possums may then lick the trap plate, or you may catch more rats as they are attracted to the trap plate.]



Nail set  
Drawing by Brown Ella, DOC

## Method 2: Brackets

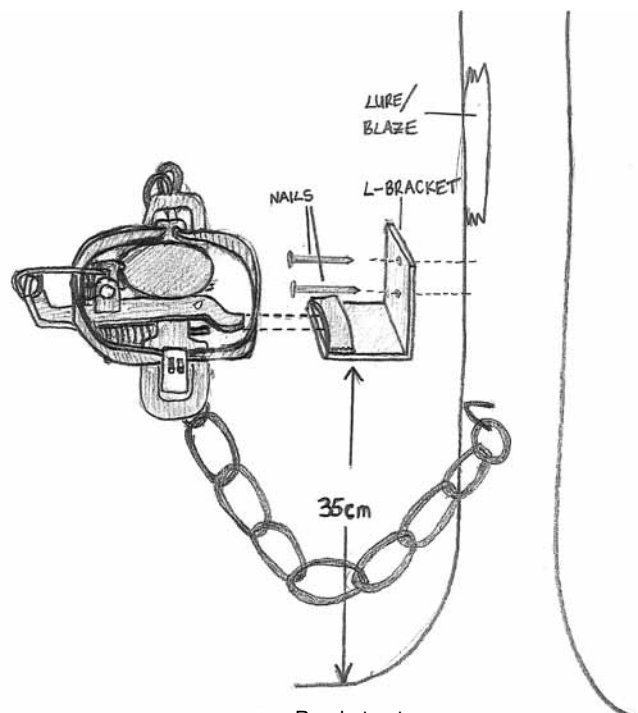
### Special equipment needed

- Aluminium L-bracket (or other approved bracket).
- Flat-head nails (2 per bracket).

### Method

- Nail aluminium L-brackets into tree, with bottom of bracket at least 35 cm above ground level.
- Staple chain onto tree at a height that allows a possum to rest on the ground if caught.
- Lure/blaze as normal above the trap.
- Set trap, then slide bottom 'leg' of the trap into the slot of the L-bracket.

[**Note 3:** many brackets may be home-made and so each may be quite different. Your ability to use any such modifications in your block needs to be approved—see Note 1.]



Bracket set  
Drawing by Rhys Burns, DOC

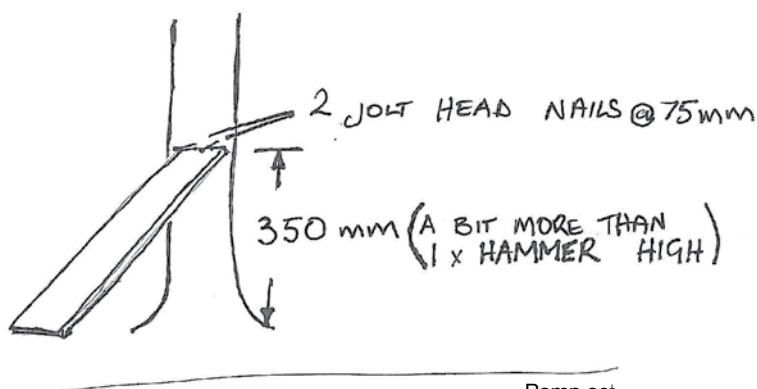
## Method 3: Ramps

### Cannot be used in weka areas

This method can be even more effective for catching possums than ground sets, as it provides a 'run' to the trap. However weka can often climb these runs, so this method cannot be used where weka are present.

### Special equipment needed

- EITHER timber board (4" x 1" x 600–800 mm long)
- OR straight log or branch found nearby, wide enough to support the trap.
- 75 mm bright steel or galvanised jolt-head nails (2 per trap).



Ramp set  
Drawing by Brown Elia, DOC

### Method

- Lean the board or branch (dead branch or ponga, wide enough to support the trap) on an angle to the tree so one end is at least 35 cm above ground level.
- Ensure the base of the leaning board is bedded in properly to the ground and the other end is firmly set against the tree.
- EITHER fix nails into tree as you would in Method 1 (40 mm apart at 35 cm height) OR ensure there is a stable flat area at the top of the ramp on which to place the trap so it is unlikely to be dislodged until it has caught a possum.
- Staple chain onto tree at a height that allows a possum to rest on the ground when caught.
- Lure/blaze as per normal.
- Set the trap. Face the trap with the trigger ('dog') against the tree and EITHER slide the springs over the two nails until the trap is resting firmly against the tree OR bed the trap securely on top of the ramp OR use a thick rubber band to hold the trap onto the ramp.

## What to do if you catch a native bird in a leg-hold trap

All native birds are protected. Kiwi and weka are absolutely protected species and require professional veterinarian attention in all circumstances if caught in a leg-hold trap. No exceptions.

If any native bird is found caught in a leg-hold trap (dead or alive, both injured or apparently uninjured) it must be taken to a vet or DOC office as soon as possible. Try to transport the bird quietly, in a dark, ventilated container.

For advice on where to take injured birds, contact your nearest DOC office.

After hours phone 0800 DOCHOT (0800 362468); the SPCA; or Kiwi Encounter, Rotorua, phone 07 350 0440 ext. 832.

## Other legal requirements of possum trappers

There have been several legislative changes in recent years that all possum trappers must comply with. Failure to do so can attract significant penalties.

Legal and permit requirements include:

- Compulsory checking of **every** set trap within 12 hours of sunrise **every day** (e.g. if leaving your block for a day or more, all traps must be closed before leaving)
- A **complete ban** on the use of 'gin traps' (i.e. toothed long-spring traps) anywhere in New Zealand, including on private land
- Only the use of No. 1 sized leg-hold traps (or up to No. 1½ if 'soft-jawed')
- Each permit holder is responsible for ensuring that any other workers on their block comply with all permit conditions at all times
- Any other conditions contained in your permit

## Getting a possum permit

If you want to trap possums on any land administered by DOC, you require a permit to do so legally. Approach your nearest DOC office, and staff there will take you through the process. You can choose any available trapping block on which you will then have exclusive permission to trap possums for the term of the permit (maximum of 4 months, with extensions possible).

DOC staff will make you aware of your responsibilities as a permit holder on public conservation land on each particular block, including whether there is any requirement to raise traps.

**There is no fee for obtaining a possum permit.**

## For more information

A guide on how to maintain your traps and best practice recommendations for leg-hold trapping possums can be found at this National Pest Control Agencies website:

<http://exon.net.nz/~tuckman/images/stories/NPCA/PDF/a4.1%20legtrap%202009-05.pdf>

## Have your say

The Department of Conservation will continually re-evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of this approach to possum trapping in ground-bird areas. We welcome constructive comments on how to make possum trapping on public conservation land more effective, while still protecting our precious native wildlife. Contact your local DOC office to provide any feedback.