

JEWELS IN THE CROWN

Two wildlife nerds are championing lizard conservation in southern New Zealand.



CAREY KNOX



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ANNA YEOMAN

Above: The schist outcrops of Mokomoko Dryland Sanctuary, where lost lizard species are being returned to the mainland. Opposite: An Otago skink (above) and a jewelled gecko (below).

As a child, Grant Norbury would head off with his binoculars and motorbike to go bird-watching while his friends went to the footie; Carey Knox scrambled the hills of the Mackenzie Country collecting grasshoppers. Nowadays they're both based in Otago, working to save some of New Zealand's beautiful lizard species, many of which are virtually unknown.

Norbury is a wildlife ecologist with Manaaki Whenua Landcare Research. At a stand-up desk in the Alexandra office he also shares with a couple of well-used mountain bikes, he exudes energy – and that's been put to good use. In 2005, Norbury gathered some friends to establish the Central Otago Ecological Trust (COET), a group with the vision of bringing back lizard species long lost from the region due to fire, farming and introduced mammals.

When *North & South* last interviewed Norbury, in 2008, the trust was problem-solving its way to captive breeding critically endangered Otago skinks. Back then, re-establishing

a wild population was a distant vision.

Twelve years later, Mokomoko Dryland Sanctuary is a reality. In the schist-studded hills behind Alexandra, 14ha of prime lizard habitat is now surrounded by a predator-proof fence. In 2018, lizards that had been extinct from the area for decades began to be returned. Jewelled geckos – the astonishingly green acrobats of the scrub – were first, followed by the 30cm rock-dwelling grand and Otago skinks. Yet Norbury is cautious. "It's early days yet as to whether we're really succeeding," he says. "A lot of translocations fail around the world."

Their current task is to establish whether the geckos and skinks have survived their first year or two in the sanctuary and whether they're beginning to breed, not easy to determine as these small creatures are notoriously good at staying hidden. That's where Carey Knox from Wildlands Consultants comes in. "Carey's the real expert," says Norbury. "He sorts of lives, eats and breathes lizards."

Knox, who admits to a "bit of an obsessive



GRANT NORBURY



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Top: Lizard expert Carey Knox and local school children release jewelled gecko into Mokomoko Dryland Sanctuary. Above: Wildlife ecologist Grant Norbury shares his passion with the next generation of enthusiasts: Jesse, two, and Tarn, four.

personality", had his first encounter with jewelled geckos in 2008. "From then on, it's just been lizards and that's it." Recognised as one of the leading experts in the country, he's helped discover four new species in Central Otago's Oteake Conservation Park in the past few years.

Knox (who took the photographs featured on the opposite page) has been carrying out lizard monitoring at Mokomoko Dryland Sanctuary and has so far re-found 36 of the original 84 jewelled geckos released, plus seven babies. All the females have been pregnant. It's a great result, as in the dense vegetation he'd expect to see only a

small portion of what's there.

He and a team from DoC also prowled the deeply creviced schist outcrops, and sighted 16 Otago skinks and 14 grand skinks. "It's a big relief," he says. "Seeing half of what we released, just like that, is a good start."

In February, they found the first two baby Otago skinks. They're thrilled – and Norbury says something he didn't anticipate was the huge enthusiasm others have shown for a community initiative such as this one. "Seeing people engaging in conservation and getting in together – it gets at your heart, that stuff."

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