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Can microbes be contributing to the decline of the North Island Brown Kiwi (*Apteryx mantelli*)?



A thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of

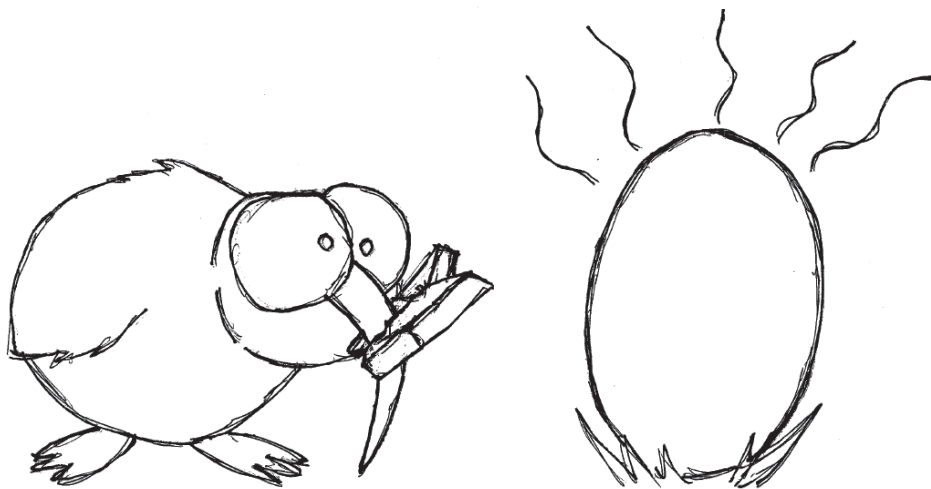
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This thesis is dedicated to my daddy, who supports me through all my endeavours- even when they stink



Abstract

North Island Brown Kiwi (NIBK, *Apteryx mantelli*) are considered nationally vulnerable. Current conservation efforts concentrate on the predator vulnerable chicks, through both intensive predator control and Operation Nest Egg (ONE), a captive hatching and rearing scheme for wild eggs. While these methods are having a positive impact on some NIBK populations, they are expensive to maintain and many NIBK populations are dependent on this intensive management to maintain and increase numbers. Ideally, a point will be reached when less intensive management is needed to maintain NIBK populations. Therefore, ONE is not a permanent conservation strategy; the aim is to phase out intensive management when predator control is deemed sufficient to protect a majority of chicks.

However, even with intensive management, overall NIBK numbers are still declining. A potentially significant and previously overlooked factor in this decline could be that NIBK eggs experience high mortality. Indeed 60 per cent of NIBK eggs in the wild do not hatch. Both infertility and predators are unlikely to be major mortality factors in NIBK eggs. Consequently, predator control efforts do little to protect eggs. Research into why NIBK eggs experience such high hatching failure is needed and future conservation work needs to be adjusted in light of the results.

The overall objective of this project was to investigate if microbes could contribute to NIBK egg mortality. This project had two aims within this objective: 1. to determine if microbes that could impact hatching success are present on and in NIBK eggs; and 2. to use the results to direct future work and conservation efforts for NIBK. These aims were addressed using four studies, which together support each other in terms of conclusions and give an understanding of the microbes present at different stages in NIBK egg development, in locations throughout the population's range.

The first two studies used 16S rRNA sequencing and/or phenotypic identification methods to identify 1. the bacteria and 2. the fungi on the shells of wild NIBK eggs. Together these provided an understanding of the types of microbes that are present on living eggs during active incubation. In contrast, the third study used 16S rRNA sequencing to identify the bacteria present inside un-hatched infertile NIBK eggs,

collected from across the North Island. In the final study, a method was designed to determine if a target bacterium could penetrate through the NIBK egg's defensive shell. This method was not finalised because the NIBK eggshells could not be sterilised. However, this result showed that NIBK eggshells harbour bacteria that survive even through medical grade cleaning. The consequence of this may mean that bacteria can survive in the shell during adverse conditions, which may result in increased penetration when conditions become suitable.

Both the shell and the contents of NIBK eggs in this study had microbes present that could impact hatching success. Of these the most prevalent was *Staphylococcus*, and while no work has been done on the impact of *Staphylococcus* on NIBK, members of this genus have been shown to significantly impact the hatching of success of chickens and other birds. The prevalence of *Staphylococcus* in NIBK eggs indicates that it may be a significant factor in NIBK hatching success and warrants further, focused investigation.

That potentially pathogenic genera were isolated from NIBK eggs in this study has consequences for both fieldwork and NIBK conservation. NIBK are known to have dangerous and contagious pathogens in their blood and digestive tracts, such as *Cryptococcus* spp. Through this research, the potentially dangerous genera *Aspergillus*, *Staphylococcus*, *Streptococcus* and *Pseudomonas* are added to this list.

The Kiwi Best Practice Manual states that 'thin sterile latex gloves' should be worn when handling eggs, however, to use dry, bare hands 'rather than gloved' when collecting an ONE egg from the wild, to 'increase sensitivity to holding the egg', as the eggs are cleaned upon arrival at the ONE facility. The eggshells in this project harboured bacteria that survive even through medical grade cleaning; therefore, the cleaning at ONE is unlikely to remove all bacteria. The conclusions of this project are that gloves should be worn at all stages of egg and bird handling, including collecting ONE eggs. This is because of the risk to the handler, as well as the egg. The results of this project also emphasise the need for all equipment used to be cleaned between individuals; this includes callipers, candling torches and weighing bags.

In regards to NIBK conservation, the results of this project suggest that predators are not the only factor in NIBK mortality. This project has shown that there are potentially

serious pathogens present on and in wild NIBK eggs that can kill avian embryos and could be contributing to NIBK egg mortality. We still do not know definitively what is causing the 60 per cent hatching failure in NIBK, but these results highlight the need for egg mortality and microbial factors to be factored in to NIBK conservation and recovery plans. Intensive management of NIBK should be phased out not only when predator control is deemed sufficient to protect the majority of chicks, but when researchers have a better understanding of what other factors contribute to NIBK mortality, at all stages of life. We need long-term, cost-effective ways to keep NIBK populations self-sustaining that protect the eggs as well as the chicks and adults. This means that phasing out of ONE needs to be considered in terms of egg mortality and not just chick survival.

More detailed studies are needed to both further identify the microbes present on wild NIBK eggs and to experimentally prove/disprove that NIBK embryos can be killed by these pathogens. This can be achieved by infecting eggs, or by cleaning them.

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Table of contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements:	vi
Table of contents	vii
List of figures.....	xiv
List of tables.....	xv
Chapter one: Kiwi – an introduction	1
1.1 Kiwi biology.....	2
1.2 Kiwi breeding	2
1.2.1 The Kiwi egg	3
1.2.2 North Island Brown Kiwi incubation	6
1.3 North Island Brown Kiwi conservation	7
1.4 Threats to wild North Island Brown Kiwi hatching success.....	8
1.5 Thesis outline and objectives	10
1.5.1 Project objectives.....	12
1.5.2 Outlines and aims of chapters	13
1.6 General methods	15
1.6.1 Laboratory site	15
1.6.2 North Island Brown Kiwi study population and study site	16
1.6.3 Sources of un-hatched North Island Brown Kiwi eggs	17
1.6.4 Methods used for literature research.....	19
1.6.5 Ethical and intellectual property issues	21
Chapter Two: Literature review; the avian egg and the impact of microorganisms ..	23
2.1 Review of the avian egg.....	24
2.1.1 Avian incubation	24
2.1.2 General avian egg structure.....	26
2.1.2.1 The eggshell.....	26

2.1.2.2 The egg contents.....	28
2.2 Avian embryo health	30
2.2.1 The effect of parental care on embryo health	30
2.2.2 The effect of environmental factors on egg health	31
2.2.3 The effect of predation on egg health.....	33
2.3 Microbial impact on avian egg health	34
2.3.1 Methods of contamination.....	35
2.3.2 Factors affecting microbial contamination.....	35
2.4 Egg defence against microbial attack	37
2.4.1 Parental behaviours as a defence	38
2.4.2 Physical properties of egg defence.....	39
2.4.3 Chemical properties of egg defence.....	41
2.4.4 Beneficial bacteria as a mechanism of egg defence.....	42
2.5 Review of previous studies of the microbes of avian eggs	43
2.5.1 Microbial contamination of domestic bird's eggs	44
2.5.2 Microbial contamination of ratite eggs	44
2.5.3 Microbial contamination of wild bird's eggs	46
 Chapter Three: Identification of bacteria on the shells of live, wild North Island	
Brown Kiwi eggs and potential impacts on hatching success	49
3.1 Introduction	50
3.2 Methods.....	51
3.2.1 Data collection.....	51
3.2.2 Method design.....	53
3.2.2.1 Bacterial identification	53
3.2.2.2 Determining potential impact on North Island Brown Kiwi embryos	54
3.3 Results.....	56
3.3.1 Bacterial presence	56
3.3.2 Bacterial identification	56

3.3.3 Hatching success of the North Island Brown Kiwi eggs in this study and the presence of bacteria on them.....	56
3.3.4 Potential pathogenic impacts on North Island Brown Kiwi eggs from bacteria isolated	59
3.3.5 Potential beneficial impacts on North Island Brown Kiwi eggs from bacteria isolated	61
3.4 Discussion	63
3.4.1 Bacterial presence.....	63
3.4.2 Bacterial identification	63
3.4.3 Potential threats to North Island Brown Kiwi embryos and hatching success from bacteria found.....	65
3.4.4 Potential benefits to North Island Brown Kiwi embryos and hatching success from bacteria found.....	66
3.4.5 Impact for North Island Brown Kiwi conservation from the results of this study	67
3.4.6 Study limitations and future work	69

Chapter four: Identification of fungi on the shells of live, wild North Island Brown

Kiwi eggs and potential impacts on hatching success.....	71
4.1 Introduction.....	72
4.2 Methods.....	73
4.2.1 Data collection	73
4.2.2 Method design.....	75
4.2.2.1 Fungal identification	75
4.2.2.2 Determining potential impact on North Island Brown Kiwi embryos.....	75
4.3 Results	78
4.3.1 First swabs	78
4.3.2 Second swabs.....	78
4.3.3 Hatching success of the North Island Brown Kiwi eggs in this study and the presence of fungi on them.....	80
4.3.4 Change in fungal composition (within and between eggs).....	80
4.4 Discussion	80
4.4.1 Fungal Presence	80
4.4.2 Fungal identification	81

4.4.3 Potential impacts to North Island Brown Kiwi embryos and hatching success from Fungi found	81
4.4.3.1 Potential impacts of <i>Aspergillus</i> and <i>Penicillium</i>	82
4.4.3.2 Potential impacts of yeast	84
4.4.4 Change in fungal composition (within and between eggs)	85
4.4.5 Impacts for North Island Brown Kiwi conservation from the results of this study	86
4.4.6 Further advice for future work	87

Chapter five: Identification of bacteria in the contents of un-hatched, wild North Island Brown Kiwi eggs and potential impacts on hatching success	89
5.1 Introduction	90
5.2 Methods.....	91
5.2.1 Justification for the use of un-hatched, infertile Operation Nest Egg eggs	91
5.2.2 Method design.....	92
5.2.2.1 Bacterial isolation	93
5.2.2.2 Bacterial identification	95
5.2.2.3 Determining potential impact on North Island Brown Kiwi embryos.....	95
5.3 Results.....	96
5.3.1 Egg descriptions.....	96
5.3.2 Bacterial presence	97
5.3.3 Bacterial identification	99
5.3.4 Potential pathogenic impacts on North Island Brown Kiwi eggs from bacteria isolated	101
5.3.4 Potential beneficial impacts on North Island Brown Kiwi eggs from bacteria isolated.....	101
5.4 Discussion	103
5.4.1 Bacterial presence	103
5.4.2 Bacterial identification	104
5.4.3 Potential threats to North Island Brown Kiwi embryos and hatching success from bacteria found	105
5.4.4 Potential benefits to North Island Brown Kiwi embryos and hatching success from bacteria found	106
5.4.5 Impacts for North Island Brown Kiwi conservation from the results of this study	107

5.4.6 Study limitations and future work	108
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**Chapter six: Initial steps in the development of a non-destructive method to test
the penetration of bacteria through the North Island Brown Kiwi eggshell110**

6.1 Introduction	111
6.2 Method development.....	114
6.2.1 Shell fragment method.....	114
6.3 Pilot trials.....	115
6.3.1 Trial 1: Agar concentration	115
6.3.1.1 Justification	115
6.3.1.2 Method.....	115
6.3.1.3 Results	116
6.3.2 Trial 2: Emptying egg contents.....	117
6.3.2.1 Justification	117
6.3.2.2 Method.....	117
6.3.2.3 Results	118
6.3.3 Trial 3: Eggshell fragment size.....	119
6.3.3.1 Justification	119
6.3.3.2 Method.....	119
6.3.3.3 Results	120
6.3.4 Trial 4: Cutting the eggshell fragment.....	120
6.3.4.1 Justification	120
6.3.4.2 Method.....	121
6.3.4.3 Results	121
6.3.5 Trial 5: Fragment placement.....	122
6.3.5.1 Justification	122
6.3.5.2 Method.....	123
6.3.5.3 Results	123
6.3.6 Trial 6: Egg cleaning	123
6.3.6.1 Justification	123

6.3.6.2 Method	124
6.3.6.3 Results.....	125
6.3.7 Trial 7: Bacterial infection method.....	128
6.3.7.1 Trial 7.1 containing the bacteria on the shell.....	128
6.3.7.1.1 Justification	128
6.3.7.1.2 Method	128
6.3.7.1.3 Results.....	128
6.3.7.2 Trail 7.2: Quantity of bacteria	130
6.3.7.2.1 Justification	130
6.3.7.2.2 Method	130
6.3.7.2.3 Results.....	131
6.3.8 Trial 8: Identifying if the bacteria penetrated the eggshell.....	132
6.3.8.1 Justification	132
6.3.9 Example of a design for additional trials testing temperature alteration using the shell fragment method	133
6.3.9.1 Justification	133
6.3.9.2 Method example.....	133
6.4 Summary of method so far.....	134
6.5 Discussion	135
Chapter seven: Discussion and conclusions	140
7.1 Conclusions about the impact microbes have on hatching success in North Island Brown Kiwi	141
7.2 Impacts of research	145
7.2.1 Recommendations for North Island Brown Kiwi conservation and Operation Nest Egg	145
7.2.2 Impacts for field work	146
7.2.3 Impacts for the field of wild avian egg microbiology	147
7.3 Future work in towards understanding North Island Brown Kiwi egg mortality	149
7.3.1 Work that is complimentary to microbial studies	149
7.3.2 Additional microbiological work.....	151

7.4 Summary.....	154
References:	156
Appendix one: List of studies of the microbial flora of wild avian eggs	185
Appendix two: DNA extraction and PCR optimisation method	189

List of figures

Figure 1.1: Map of the North Island of New Zealand showing the distribution of North Island Brown Kiwi populations	3
Figure 1.2: X-ray of a pregnant North Island Brown Kiwi showing size of egg in relation to female's body	4
Figure 1.3: Map of the north island of New Zealand showing field site, laboratory site and the three Operation Nest Egg sites used in this study	16
Figure 1.4: Example of packing used to transport North Island Brown Kiwi eggs in this study	18
Figure 2.1: Generalised drawing of structures of an avian egg	26
Figure 2.2: An illustrative representation of the structure of a chicken eggshell.....	28
Figure 2.3: Scanning electron microscopic photograph of shell membrane	28
Figure 3.1: Example Blood and MacConkey agar plates with swabs from a wild North Island Brown Kiwi eggshell after 48 hours incubation at 36°C.....	53
Figure 4.1: Examples of morphological features used to identify fungi	77
Figure 5.1: Locations of the four swabs taken from eggs for this study	94
Figure 5.2: Example of the opening made to swab the contents of North Island Brown Kiwi eggs for bacteria	95
Figure 5.3: Blood agar plates showing comparison between a sample having a dominant bacterial species and having mixed growth	99
Figure 6.1: Layout of shell fragment method.....	114
Figure 6.2: Tools used to suck egg contents out of whole eggs.....	118
Figure 6.3: Diagram of the three distinct areas of avian eggshells.....	119
Figure 6.4: Comparison of different sized North Island Brown Kiwi eggshell fragments	120
Figure 6.5: Use of Ozito rotary tool kit to cut North Island Brown Kiwi eggshells.....	122
Figure 6.6: Result of an eggshell sterilising attempt.....	124
Figure 6.7: Comparison of the bacterial growth present after attempts to sterilise North Island Brown Kiwi eggshells.....	126
Figure 6.8: Example of filter paper placement on North Island Brown Kiwi fragment	131

List of tables

Table 1.1: A comparison of the composition of egg white proteins from several avian species.....	5
Table 1.2: Comparison of egg infertility for several endangered bird species in New Zealand.....	9
Table 1.3: The fate of North Island Brown Kiwi eggs from three separate populations.....	10
Table 1.4: A list of the North Island Brown Kiwi eggs used in this study	18
Table 1.5: List of the key words used in the literature research for the pathogenic and beneficial impacts of the bacteria isolated in this project.....	21
Table 2.1: List of some of the antimicrobial proteins in avian egg albumen and their function	29
Table 3.1: List of wild North Island Brown Kiwi eggs from Ponui Island swabbed for bacteria in 2011	55
Table 3.2: List of all bacteria identified off wild North Island Brown Kiwi eggshells from Ponui Island.....	57
Table 3.3: List of bacterial genera isolated off shells of wild North Island Brown Kiwi eggs that hatched and did not hatch	58
Table 3.4: Results of literature search of potential pathogenic factors of bacterial genera isolated off wild North Island Brown Kiwi eggshells.....	59
Table 3.5: Results of literature search on antibiotic or bacteriocin production by bacterial genera isolated off wild North Island Brown Kiwi shells	62
Table 4.1: List of the fate of wild North Island Brown Kiwi eggs from Ponui Island swabbed for fungi.....	74
Table 4.2: List of the key words used in the literature research for the pathogenic and beneficial impacts of the fungi isolated in this project.....	76
Table 4.3: List of the fungi isolated from wild North Island Brown Kiwi eggs of different ages from Ponui Island.....	79
Table 5.1: Size of eleven North Island Brown Kiwi eggs obtained for this study	96
Table 5.2: Visual description of the egg contents of eleven North Island Brown Kiwi eggs obtained for this study.....	97

Table 5.3: The presence of bacteria inside eleven un-hatched North Island Brown Kiwi eggs.....	98
Table 5.4: Bacteria isolated from inside eight un-hatched North Island Brown Kiwi eggs.....	100
Table 5.5: Results of literature search of potential pathogenic factors of bacterial genera isolated from inside un-hatched North Island Brown Kiwi eggs	102
Table 5.6: Results of literature search on antibiotic or bacteriocin production by bacterial genera isolated from inside un-hatched North Island Brown Kiwi eggs	103
Table 6.1: Comparison of different the agar concentrations in regards to setting time and consistency	116
Table 6.2: Comparison of tools used to cut both chicken and North Island Brown Kiwi eggshells	121
Table 6.3: List and description of the eight methods trialled in this study to attempt to clean eggshell fragments	125
Table 6.4: Comparison of the sterilising treatments used on North Island Brown Kiwi eggshell fragments	127
Table 6.5: Comparison of methods used to contain a bacterial suspension on an eggshell fragment	129
Table 6.6: A comparison of bacterial suspension concentrations to use for the shell fragment method	132
Table 6.7: The layout of a trial to test effect of temperature change on penetrability of bacteria through avian eggshell fragments	134