

Geckos & Skinks. The remarkable lizards of Aotearoa

By Anna Yeoman, Potton & Burton, October 2024, softcover, 252 pages, \$59.99. Reviewed by Emma Gregg, Palmerston North Tramping and Mountaineering Club.

Geckos and Skinks is a beautiful and enjoyable way to learn about those mysterious lizards that once were abundant in Aotearoa but now are rarely encountered. It is no ordinary non-fiction book. Rather than bombarding you with facts, figures and labelled sketches, this book grabs your interest with stories of mystery, suspense and surprise.

Many have heard the amazing tale of the takahē and its crawl back from extinction due to an undiscovered population. But have you heard of the niho taniwha, also known as the chevron skink, of Aotea Great Barrier Island? A 35-centimetre-long skink living in comparatively more populated areas than the takahē, yet still lost to science for 70 years!

Or how about the tale of the great hunt for a particularly elusive and rare new species of gecko, with decades between sightings despite many hours of searching by experienced lizard hunters, until finally: success and the new species is recorded – or is it?

These are just two of the terrific true stories told by Anna Yeoman about the discovery of over 30 geckos and skinks, and the people whose lives have changed because of them. These accounts are not just about lizards; they are also about the determined and resourceful people who dedicate significant time to finding and studying New Zealand's lizards. Some are developing new scientific techniques, such as extracting DNA from ancient bones, and all are



adapting and developing methods to rescue and increase the populations of these often undervalued species.

Each chapter in *Geckos and Skinks* focuses on a particular geographic location, and they don't have to be read sequentially. I flicked immediately to my local areas to find out what I could hope to spot, and I wasn't disappointed. This gave me a newfound interest in Mana Island, whereas before I barely gave it consideration. Turns out Mana Island is quite the success story for lizard populations. I think a visit is in order!

Accompanying the stories are superb photographic illustrations. These are important, because even if you're lucky enough to spot one of the featured lizards, chances are it will be a fleeting encounter. The photos enable the reader to admire at leisure the beautiful patterns of each lizard.

Aotearoa is often thought of as the land of birds, but it also once belonged to the lizards. I've learnt a great deal from reading *Geckos and Skinks*. I hope this book builds awareness about these beautiful, mysterious creatures that still co-exist with us, so that their numbers soar. Get a copy of this book, be inspired and see what you can discover.