

Why are New Zealand animals so big

To be used with the Tangihua lions lodge program



New Zealand plays host to a range of invertebrates that display all the characteristics of island gigantism. Island gigantism occurs when in the absence of constraints (such as predators), native species grow larger than in other places. We once had the moa and the Haast's eagle (the biggest eagle in the world) which are now extinct but plenty of giants remain.

New Zealand wildlife evolved for 80 million years without any terrestrial mammals (except for the bats). The absence of Mammalian predators, and the insects performing the ecological function of rodents in mammalian ecosystems gave them the perfect opportunity to grow enormous and many of them did.

Around the lodge there are three examples of species which can reach gigantic sizes

Kauri snails can reach an enormous size, capable of sucking up earthworms that are equally large by insect standards. Seventy endemic species of weta comprise another large insect group, in which 11 giant weta species are gigantic, with the largest being the world's heaviest insect. Eels

In New Zealand's contemporary disrupted ecosystems, introduced rats are predators of ecologically useful insects such as weta, and an assortment of other indigenous invertebrates, bats, and birds.

Giant weta are the classic example of species growing larger in the absence of predators, and in New Zealand's case, taking the the ecological niche that rodents fill in other countries. Problem was, when rodents came to Aotearoa, they dined out on the weta, relegating many of the gentle giants to offshore islands (or in the case of the Mahoenui giant weta - tucked inside dense gorse bushes, like in this video).

