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NZ Newswire May 6, 2013, 12:16 pm



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Sauvignon blanc lovers flock there and now the falcon will too.

Marlborough's wine-laden vineyards are set to become home to New Zealand's last surviving bird of prey in order to help protect the threatened bird from the mouths of stoats and hedgehogs.

Research by University of Canterbury biologists has revealed for the first time these pesky predators, together with feral cats, pose the biggest threat to the ground-nesting New Zealand falcon, the country's supreme aerial hunter.

In an innovative study, researchers studied teeth marks on wax eggs planted in fake falcon nests to find the egg-eating culprits.

The discovery is significant for the dwindling population of falcon, of which there are just 4000 breeding pairs left.

Biology researcher Sara Kross says the find is the first to identify the offenders and confirms that the falcon, which nests mainly in the hills, would be far safer in flat valleys that are home to vineyards.

Relocating the iconic bird to wine country would offer "considerable potential for the protection and conservation" of falcons, and the wineries would get benefits too.

"Falcons can provide ecosystem services for vineyards in the form of pest control and they exhibit more attention to their nests,"

Dr Kross said.

The project, partially-funded by wine company Brancott Estate, aims to move a group of falcon into the region in the hope it could reverse the population decline.

The falcon, famed for flying at speeds of up to 230km/h, is the country's only remaining native bird of prey.

It was voted the native New Zealand bird of the year but bird lovers say without help it will go the way of 58 other native bird species that have become extinct since the arrival of humans.

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