

ENDEMIC SPECIES FEATURE

KŌURA

New Zealand freshwater crayfish

Paranephrops planifrons

The kōura (New Zealand freshwater crayfish) is a fascinating and unique species found only in New Zealand. These crayfish live in clear, cool streams and rivers across both the North and South Islands, thriving in environments like alpine streams, lowland rivers, and wetlands. Their hard, dark-brown to reddish exoskeletons (outside 'shell-like' structure) help them blend in with the rocky riverbeds and muddy banks they inhabit, providing them with protection from predators. In the South Island they can grow up to 70mm long.

Kōura are nocturnal, meaning they're most active at night. During the day, they hide under rocks or burrow into the mud. At night, they come out to scavenge for food, feeding on a variety of things such as plants, small invertebrates, and decaying organic matter. They pretty much eat anything that is small enough, including whitebait. Kōura play a really important role in keeping freshwater ecosystems healthy by breaking down dead plant and animal matter.

Kōura are territorial and prefer to live alone. A fun fact is that if they lose a limb, they can regenerate it, which helps them survive encounters with larger predators like trout and birds, such as shags. Imagine if you were to lose your leg, you could just regrow it! When threatened, kōura will retreat into their burrows or hide under large stones, using their strong claws (also called chelae) to defend themselves. Their antennae are equipped with sensory hairs, allowing them to detect changes in the environment and react quickly to danger.

Breeding takes place between September and March, with females carrying fertilised eggs under their tail until they hatch. This process can take several months. After hatching, the larvae are carried by the current before settling into suitable habitats. As they grow, kōura undergo moulting, shedding their exoskeletons and revealing a larger, stronger shell.

In places like the Brook Waimārama Sanctuary, kōura are an important part of the freshwater ecosystem. If you're lucky enough to spot one, you might hear the gentle ripple of water as it scuttles across the riverbed —proof that these remarkable creatures are thriving in New Zealand's pristine freshwater environments.

You can help protect kōura by keeping your rivers and streams clean and putting them back where you found them.



Source: Kati Doehring, Cawthron Institute