

When natural selection needs a hand



I've just been down to check on the ducklings. There's four left. That's a survival rate of 44.44 percent, recurring. Is that good, or bad? I don't know.

It's called "natural selection", isn't it. Charles Darwin theorised that life forms thrive through an evolutionary process he dubbed "survival of the fittest". Genes and things.

I'm not sure how that worked with my ducklings, since it was likely a few simply succumbed to bad luck, eels and pūkeko, which my mate Lance reckons are murder on ducklings. I think less of pūkeko now. In fact, I felt no remorse when I bowled one on the road at Egmont Village this week. I imagined he was the one who got my ducklings.

I have to admit the ducklings weren't actually mine. I felt a kind of ownership, but it's the form you imagine when you see something as endearing as they were at the place you walk most days to keep fit, Pukekura Park.

It's more accurate to say the nine ducklings I saw on the park's main lake earlier this spring didn't belong to me at all. They were the park's, although strictly speaking even that's not right. They come and go, so don't belong to anyone.

Except their mother, temporarily. I don't think there was a father duck in attendance when I first spotted the little critters at the rotunda end of the lake. My phone came out, of course, and lots of snaps taken. Cute. Next day, there were eight, but mum probably didn't notice. A family that size of fearless, curious, tiny beings must be impossible to keep track of. How many would survive, I wondered?

I also started to think about how natural selection might be affecting me (we have very strange thoughts, us columnists). I've done three score and 10, which was once New Zealanders' average life expectancy. The old selector has been kind, and now I'm getting the bonus.

How big that turns out to be is something you could find yourself dwelling on if you weren't careful, and that could lead to positive credit turning to negative, because you could get distracted wondering when the balance is going to run out. Sooner than expected, on that pathway.

If natural selection is about the genes we inherit, then I need to be careful. The worry gene is big in my family. After father had his first heart attack at 54 he decided he was basically jiggered,

on a pathway to the end, which would arrive soon, if not imminently. He felt that way for the next 30 years.

I tend to covert what looks like a decidedly more optimistic set of genes, even though my access is by association only. My father-in-law lived until he was 99, missing out on the queen's telegram by mere months (a text would have been nice). He was full of life, even came with me to the BeeGees' last NZ concert when he was 91, later went and bought their CDs.

Recently, I've been interviewing an 84-year-old man for a book about his life. Talk about energetic and sharp. I want to somehow borrow his attitude. His selection is as natural as it comes, thank you very much.

The ducklings, though, have done less well, if we judge by numbers. I got bad flu not long after our first fling, so didn't get a chance to check their progress for a month (for a while there it felt like the selector was eyeing me up). When I finally found the legs to wander down to the lake again, I could see only two of the little fellahs trailing mother across the lake.

But then I spotted what looked like two more. Typical teenagers, they were tasting a bit of independence out in the middle. But my naturally selected eyesight wasn't good enough for me to be sure.

Help arrived in the form of a young man pushing a pram and holding a three-year-old by the hand. Would he mind having a look? Were they a couple of ducklings? Yes, looks like it, he said. There were nine once, I said. He supposed it was natural selection.

The three-year-old set about feeding the ducks. Next thing, he walked off the edge and disappeared. I grabbed the pram while dad grabbed the kid, who was by turn wet, shocked, chastened, dried, re-clothed and cheerful again.

Well done, selector, I thought but didn't say.