



Matakohē-Limestone Island Ranger Report – October 2009

This month the report could start with the same sentence as last month, never a dull moment. If you want to know how to liven up the island rangers, check out the **DOG** story below. As you will also see below, spring has well and truly arrived with the island birds very active. The trees are also covered in fresh growth as the classic spring weather continues and encourages them to grow.

Kiwi

- The kiwi-breeding season is well underway. Todd Hamilton has brought three chicks over this month, from eggs hatched by their Dads in Purua. Two of the chicks came on the same day and are nest mates; their father is Old Fella. By coincidence these two chicks arrived just as Olly Ball's NorthTec class was leaving the island and they were able to have a peek in the boxes.
- We also got off to a good start with kiwi breeding on the island. Our young pair of Sir Ed and Kahui Whetu have had their second successful clutch. To our surprise and delight, they have just hatched two chicks. The chicks are a bit smaller than average at the moment but appear to be healthy and we are sure they will put on weight quickly. Cathy has inserted microchips into both birds so we know who they are next time we catch up with them. Feather samples have also been taken for DNA sex determination. We suspect, based on bill length, one is male and the other a female. Females tend to have longer bills right from hatching.
- Hatching the chicks has been a big 80 day marathon for Sir Ed who is quite thin and weighing a relatively light 1500 gm. Sir Ed also had his routine transmitter change as the chicks were microchipped, to reduce the amount of handling and disturbance for them all.
- Pete was very surprised to see an adult kiwi run from the grassland into the planted area one day recently. Presumably the tractor had disturbed the kiwi - Pete was mowing at the time.
- We are thinking we should definitely call the penguin boxes kiwi boxes. We put one of the chicks Todd brought over into a penguin box and were interested to find it still there five days later. It obviously liked and felt secure in its new home. Pete also recently found Kahui Whetu in the penguin box at Flax Fields.



Sir Ed and Kahui Whetu have been a very busy young couple producing two chicks – note the pen for scale

Flora

- Spring is definitely here with not only the trees putting on a growth spurt, but also the firebreaks have also been growing like mad, keeping Pete busy on the mower.
- Weed control has also been on the list with the fence lines and bait stations being sprayed. Periwinkle, German Ivy and pampas have all had some attention as well.
- The Wednesday Volunteers tackled something a bit different this month, cutting plants down rather than nurturing them. They cleared bait station runs in the Onerahi school site area, as they had become so thick with regenerating plants the area was almost impenetrable. It took Pete up to half an hour to mark each line with flagging tape, but once the runs were cut it only took a couple of minutes to scramble up and down. In the long term not only does this make it easier to service the lines, but also means that just the one track is used each time letting the rest of the area come away without being trampled. A very good job done and the volunteers were truly surprised by the amount and the diversity of the regeneration taking place. No doubt in part due to Dwane's work on this site. In fact Dwane might struggle to recognise the area when he returns.

Fauna

- The male dotterel put on a very convincing broken wing display for us last week. Sure enough, two days later, we spied three chicks (little fuzzy bumblebees) zipping around on the sand barge. This is very good news as their first clutches have been predated for the last two years, possibly by harrier hawk or black back gull. Once the chicks hatch they have generally gone on to successfully fledge. The chicks are very mobile already and are giving their parents the run around, gathering them up whenever we appear.
- The Caspian terns on Knight Island had up to 20 eggs earlier in the month, but on our last visit many of the eggs had been predated and they are down to six at the moment. More scrapes are being developed and, going on previous years, these will be more successful. It seems that once the black backs start nesting they are more aggressive at keeping off the harriers and the Caspians have more luck hatching their eggs.
- Pete spotted the wood pigeon again this month, on two occasions, indicating there is already some food available to them, which will only improve over time.
- The artificial refuges (made from Onduline roofing) for the ornate skinks have been placed around the release site and will be checked, probably January/February next year, to see how they are going. After our experience capturing them on Whatupuke it will be interesting to see if they use the refuges, or we may have to resort to hand catching to check them.

Predator Control

- The island remains quiet with no trap catches. The tracking tunnels have been set for three nights with no rodent tracking detected for the 135 tracking nights.
- In the buffer zone two stoats, one weasel and five possums have been caught. The possums were all at Onemama Point and show how mobile they are, moving around the shoreline and across the paddocks to reinvade the Onemama bush.
- Thank you to Olly Ball and his NorthTec students who spent a day looking at the island predator program and then helped out with the north end bait stations.

Visitors

- Fran and Neil, travellers from the north of England, spent a couple of days on the island volunteering and checking out the project. Fran works for her local District Council at home managing restoration projects on vacant industrial land specialising in birds of prey.
- Peter Winton, friends and family spent a day on the island.
- Olly Ball with his NorthTec Environmental Science students.
- Iain Reid and his new NorthTec class, studying the island's restoration, also began their six-week program visiting the island each Wednesday.
- John Mephan from Better Contractors, Ken Massey and Iain Reid from the committee have been over putting together an application to the NRC Environment Fund for weed spraying on the island.

General

- **DOG** – yes we had a staffie cross type dog abandoned on the island at the beginning of the month. One of the neighbours reported a dog barking and shortly after Cathy spotted it near the northern quarry. Pete tried to approach the dog but it promptly disappeared, this was obviously going to be a difficult dog to catch. A couple of quick phone calls and a WDC Dog Control officer and DOC Ranger were on the way. The Dog Control Officer did get an opportunity to approach the dog while it was hiding under a rock outcrop near the beach – a biscuit was thrown down but as soon as the dog came out and spotted the officer it was off. He made the call to shoot the dog and the DOC hunter killed the dog with a single shot. Not a very nice situation for any of us, but we are very grateful for the prompt and professional response from Whangarei District Council Dog Control and the Department of Conservation Area Office. The dog, which had no collar or microchip, appears to have been on the island for only a few hours, remaining on or near the northern beaches looking for a way off. Thank you to Sheryl Mai for organising the very good press release. We have had no contact from the owner before or since the article went to press.
- Carla Janssen and Gerry Brackenbury did a great job putting together a display board promoting the island for the Museum Open Day – this will no doubt be a valuable asset for other public displays in the future.
- The official Shelter Opening is planned for 3 November with the Associate Minister for Conservation, Hon Kate Wilkinson, as guest of honour. Jane Winton from the committee has been doing a fantastic job pulling everything together.
- Cathy also recently attended a bird course run at the DOC Area Office by Kate McInnes, the DOC Vet. This was very interesting and it is always good to brush up on your techniques and learn some new ones.
- Cathy had a trip to Te Pahi with Ben Barr from DOC Conservancy earlier in the month. The aim of the trip was to carry out a survey of the grey-faced petrel colony up at the top of Cape Reinga. It was interesting to see a different petrel colony and also to have the opportunity to use a burrow scope. The burrow scope is a long tube which has a camera at the tip. This is passed down the burrow to see whether it is occupied. There were a number of predated adults around the site (probably by cats or stoats) so it was very encouraging to see that at least half the burrows contained chicks. Predator control work has now begun on the site so hopefully all the chicks located will go on to fledge and next year there will be even more occupied burrows. Cathy could not resist taking out a chick to show the trappers - her petrel hit for the year. She didn't even mind when it regurgitated – aaah that wonderful petrel aroma.
- Ben and Cathy assisted with the kauri snail survey in an area, which will have predator control (pigs and rats) carried out shortly to protect these amazing creatures. They found a number of adult shells which had been predated by rats – the shells were very neatly eaten back from the opening so the rats could get to the snail inside. Hopefully this will become a thing of the past with increased rodent control.
- They also did some night spotting for geckos (unsuccessful) and a day time search. The day search turned up a North Cape green gecko – beautiful.
- While there, Cathy also helped with some snail work and discovered an 'At Risk Nationally Uncommon' saprophytic plant called *Thismia rodwayi*, of which there are very few recordings in Northland.



Thismia rodwayi discovered by Cathy while working at Te Pahi

Upcoming

- The lizard trips for November are currently being organised. If anyone has a 15hp outboard that we could borrow as a spare motor could they please contact Pete on 09 436 0923. Last year we almost had to abandon the trip when the normally very reliable island motor failed on the first day. A spare motor would at least give us a back up plan if required.
- **Volunteer Wednesday – 4 November.** Pickup at 9am returning after lunch approximately 1.30pm. Pete is planning to revisit the moth plant sites and release some of the Whau trees planted this year.
- Some of you may have already heard, but we have formally indicated that we will not be extending our contract again at the end of this year. We have been on the island for four years and feel the time is right to hand it on. It has also been reassuring for us personally to hear of one or two very good applicants who are keen to apply for the job. At this stage we anticipate handing over in early January 2010.

Pete and Cathy



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