



Matakohē-Limestone Island Ranger Report – December 2010

The grass is turning brown, the pohutukawa are turning red and the birds are whistling “jingle bells”. It must be Christmas. We picked up our Christmas tree this week (very exciting) and got many strange looks from the fishermen on the pontoon as we loaded it into the dinghy. It is on our deck and I am pretty sure the weta who was living under the couch cushions has moved in already.

Many thanks to the Wollies who came along to our last wollie day for the year and for the beautiful food everyone brought for the shared lunch. Apologies to those who couldn't make it but we will do it again next year. Ian B suggested we do it every month!. Thanks for a great first year and see you all in 2011.

Fauna

- Some of the Wednesday wollies helped us put in some pitfall traps to augment the current “ACOs” that we use for monitoring the success of the ornate skink translocation. ACO stands for Artificial Cover Object - a fancy name for bits of old roof material that you put on the ground for lizards to live under. The idea behind adding the pitfalls was that the ACOs on their own are not working as well as they could as a detection tool because the lizards have so many natural cover options at the site. The pitfall traps will be baited and run for several nights; because they are a trap rather than a refuge we should, hopefully, have a greater chance of detecting individuals present. One very exciting find whilst at the site was the capture and identification of an **ornate skink juvenile** – only very slightly larger than a neonate. This is the first sign of successful breeding on the island. Hopefully the first of many we will find when we run the new pitfalls.
- The oyster catchers are persevering with their nesting attempts despite harrying by black back gulls and harriers. Two nests on the sand barge were predated in quick succession but there are currently at least four pairs on the island that are sitting on eggs. Even better, the pair that regularly nest next to the picnic table (a very silly spot really) have managed to hatch two chicks. This is despite fairly regular disturbance by visitors, our comings and goings and the nest very nearly being stood on by some inquisitive kids. The chicks are currently mid-sized mottled grey fluff balls. They are hard to get a look at though, as when you approach mum and dad give the warning signal and the chicks go and crouch behind the nearest rock and tuck their heads under so they look like rocks themselves. Very, very cute. Meanwhile, mum and dad dive bomb you with alarming ferocity and blood-curdling screeches. This photo is the best I could do and I was still risking life and limb to get it.



Festive oyster catcher chick

- Mowgli and partner successfully got their two chicks off the ground and then disappeared for a while. We have just spotted that Mowgli has returned so they might be back to try again soon.
- We also had some good gecko spotting this month. One of the released common geckos was spotted again and she looked to be pregnant, which bodes well for the coming year. Ben also spotted two pacific geckos out at night feeding on flax flowers including a juvenile. This suggests that the females that were pregnant have given birth successfully and the young are surviving on the island. Plenty of that tucker here at the moment. The flax flowers are not really being utilised by tui as far as we can tell, and we suspect that might be because they are nesting at mainland sites and foraging close to home.
- While pulling in the dinghy at low tide we saw a very strange shore bird feeding on the rocks next to the sunken sand barge. It had distinctive grey plumage without mottling and a medium length straight bill. Intrigued we went to the bird guide and are reasonably certain it was a tattler, based on its size, plumage and behaviour. The tattlers are uncommon Arctic migrants and one or two probably reach our shores each year. Ben went tattler hunting with his camera but could not relocate it despite employing his best stalking skills. Let's hope it had a pleasant time on Matakohē-Limestone Island and comes back next year to escape the Arctic winter.

Kiwi

- Sir Ed once again proved to be a model parent, sticking with his chicks for over three weeks post-hatch. This was despite being disturbed for his annual transmitter change two weeks after they hatched. He was extremely skinny though, and hopefully is now putting on some condition – especially if he thinks about trying again.
- Glen has not been such a perfect model. His nest was due to hatch on 24 November but his transmitter continued to transmit the incubating signal for nearly twenty days past that date. Cathy came over several times during this period to check the nest with us and determined he was still sitting on (and protectively guarding) an egg well into December. We began to suspect this egg was a dud, either infertile or a late failure; poor old Glen had a couple of these last year. However, we still could not rule out there wasn't another chick in there so we went back for another more thorough look. This time though, instead of an egg, we found a very recently hatched chick with baby soft feet and belly - a much better result than a stinky dud egg! We had to apologise profusely to Glen for doubting him. We still don't have a clear answer as to why this egg seemed to take so long to hatch. Possibilities are that there was another chick that hatched much earlier and moved out of the nest while we were leaving Glen alone to hatch the second egg, or, Glen has buried a dud egg in there. The mystery remains until Glen and the chick move out and we can investigate the nest CSI style.
- Baldrick once again proved elusive for a couple of days during the monthly checks. I don't know where she goes - she must have a secret underground lair somewhere.



Cathy (clearly) at full stretch checking on Glen's nest

Predator Control

- All quiet on the island this month. Many thanks to James our volunteer who has provided some more rabbits ready for the stoat dispersal season ahead. The buffer has also been quiet too.
- MOUSE BUST. On a pleasantly cool early December evening, with the help of some more keen volunteers we undertook the baiting of the N-Y half of the island. Some found their lines to be a lovely stroll - the ones Ben and volunteer James had been clearing and marking. Others found their lines to be rather "resistant". Ben and James are working hard in this heat to get them all to the lovely stage.
- We also ran the tracking tunnels this month. No sign of any nasties which is great. Heaps of bird prints in almost every tunnel.

Flora

- Until very recently the island was looking very dry and plants looked to be struggling. This was a bit of a worry this early in the summer and we had grave fears for many of our new plantings. Then, like the perfect Christmas gift, it started raining on a Wednesday and hasn't really stopped since. Great for the plants and for our tank as well. What makes it even more perfect is that it looks like it might stop just in time for a sunny Christmas weekend - the ideal scenario.
- As well as the flax and pohutakawa flowers, there is plenty of fruit starting to ripen on the trees for summer food for birds and lizards, including five finger, kawakawa, karaka and loads of green coprosma fruit.
- Unfortunately the island is already very dry and some of the new plantings are already struggling a bit. Hopefully we get a decent whack of rain sometime soon, but preferably not on Christmas day. On a more positive note we snapped this photo with Gerry recently. It shows a patch of whau, towering above Gerry, who is no midget, planted on the south coast only last year. Whau is a plant that lives fast and dies young - a short, fast paced life where it rapidly colonises a site and is then replaced by longer lived species.



Gerry and the unbelievable whau

Visitors

- A Maungakaramea school class came over with committee member Diane Kaiser this month. Jo spent the day with them trying out some new school group activities - a plant identification worksheet and memory game, and tracking tunnel print identification. Diane gave the kids a talk on the human history as well and then they did a quick beach clean up so they had a very full day.

- The M.V Waipapa has started running its summer afternoon and evening boat trips and has brought many first time visitors over to the island. Over one hundred visitors already. It cruises down the harbour from the Town Basin and then lets people off for a brief visit to the island. Talking to some of the visitors they are definitely keen to come back again and spend a bit more time on the island in future.
- Marcus Lush and the "North" film crew came back again - they clearly couldn't get enough of Limestone Island.
- The Wednesday wollies for the last time this year. As well as the crew that helped with the pitfalls there was also a crew who cleared the walking tracks. Ian Buckley and Tim Grove built an outstanding set of shelves for the hazardous goods shed out of all sorts of bits and pieces of timber.
- Island sitters. Many, many thanks to our wonderful island sitters John Ward and John Elliott. They manned the helm while Ben and I had some time off the island. We weren't holidaying though. We were chasing lizards (copper, ornate, moko and rainbow skink to be precise) at Shakespear Regional Park in Auckland, as part of a regional monitoring program – great fun.

General

- Sourcing sites and permissions for forest gecko collection for next year.
- Well what a surprise - a bit more mowing.
- Murray and the Parkcare crew again - to get those tracks looking good and feeling less itchy for Christmas visitors

Upcoming

- **No volunteer Wednesday in January !** You have earned yourselves a break. However, if you are simply heartbroken by this turn of events (understandably) then there may be the opportunity to come on spotlighting trips with us to search for forest gecko for next year's translocation. It will involve night work in late January and require a good torch, keen eyes and confidence moving about in bush areas in the dark. Give us a call or an email to find out more.
- We will also be looking for volunteers to collect seed next year for our direct seeding trial work for difficult sites. Contact Jo if you think you might like to help.

And if you happen to be on the island visiting over summer keep an eye out for people who might be about to fire up a BBQ or light a fire unaware of the fire ban.

Wishing you lots of Christmas cheer and figgy pudding

Jo and Ben



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