



Matakohē-Limestone Island Ranger Report December 2014

The Petrels are here

After a marathon effort in pretty average conditions, the enthusiastic petrel gathering team ("petrel pesterers" as this breed is known) managed to wrangle 28 Oi on Taranga Island. My hat goes off to these guys, together with the support crew on the mainland, for the awesome effort. I have never seen folk so keen and happy to put one hundred per cent into their work every day.

I will begin this report with a quick diary of the events leading up to the arrival of the Oi on Matakohē-Limestone Island.

The trip started on the Friday before leaving for Taranga when all the gear was quarantined at DOC Whangarei and first of all a big thank you to the team there as the project could not have got off the ground without their help. This Friday quarantining was great as it meant a worry free weekend and nothing could be added to the gear on the Monday.

Monday

A 4.00 a.m. start on the 'El Pescador' skippered by Trevor Jackson for a dreamy ride to Taranga. Trevor is second mate on the regular Sunday cruise boat, 'Waipapa'. Once on the island we set up camp and then got straight into it, weighing and measuring the birds on the west side. The news was not great as, not only was the weather forecast extremely variable, but the petrels were very light or too mature. Team Leader Cathy had to make some hard choices.

A spooky, foggy/misty rain had rolled in by the time we moved to the east end burrows making conditions less than ideal. This meant we had to abandon work as measuring birds in the wet is not ideal and could be dangerous for their health. We had almost finished up to the east side at this stage and arrived back at camp sodden and requiring food and sleep - sleep that was until loads of penguins and petrels started calling with other sea birds whilst winging past, what a cool place.

Tuesday

No alarm clock required here; what a cacophony; kaka, tui, bellbirds, saddlebacks, kukupa, and kākārīki all dripping off the trees, marvellous. The day was still damp at the top with mist present all day - made it feel more ancient somehow. We started on the burrows behind camp at this stage and then made our way up to finish the east side and the burrows on the camp track. The weather had slackened off slightly although it was still misty around the tops. I must mention the food supply whilst on the island was more than adequate, double breakfasts the norm, a new concept for me.

Wednesday

Weather panned out gorgeous with a day off planned. Cathy needed to process some data and make decisions. Grant and John B. trekked up the hill again taking photos and cutting steps. These proved critical the next day when we were bringing the birds down. John W. and I got the petrel storage area ready, went for a fish and John managed to catch a decent schnapper that went down well with dinner that night. I managed a feed of kina but not all were happy to partake - strange! Derek was probably the most sensible of all relaxing and saving himself for the next day.

Thursday

Collection Day; an early start with the team splitting into two groups; half went up behind the camp and the other to the west end site. Both groups then converged and moved to the east end site. We finished the day with the collection of the birds down the Wahine Bay track towards the camp. In total, we were only able to collect 28 birds out of the possible 148 we had located beforehand. There are many theories why so many birds were underweight or too mature but it seems to be just one of those things.

Friday

Delivery day. Martin Hunt of Whangarei Heads Landcare Forum fame had arrived on Taranga on Thursday night. Early on Friday the huge amount of gear went aboard followed by the birds - they had the best seats, in the saloon. The ride home was magic with the misty rain and some huge baitfish workups chasing us all the way home. Hundreds of sea birds dotted the ocean, providing some entertainment with their antics and some species identification. After arrival at the island pontoon the birds were unloaded followed by the Blessing which was attended by more than 25 Ngati Wai, Te Parawhau, Committee members, dignitaries and friends. These hardy, slightly damp folk were really delighted to have the opportunity to see Oi close at hand.

Cathy and Tanya rehydrated the fluffy chicks at the refurbished petrel station then they were placed in their burrows for some peace and quiet before the start of the feeding schedule. (Photos of the Blessing, feeding etc. are currently coming in from many quarters and a selection will appear in the next Report).

I must add here the absolutely stellar job done by the Onerahi Primary School children collecting the sardines for the chicks' "smoothies". On hearing about the need for sardines, these kids took it upon themselves to collect as many tins as possible. They collected over 150. We needed a large number of tins as it was expected 15 would be required each feeding day. A big thank you to Luka, Noah, Nellie and Jade and, of course their teacher, Issie.



Volunteers/Visitors and Talks

- As part of an environmental project sponsored by the Whangarei Branch of NZ Red Cross, a small group of children from an immersion class within Ngunguru Primary School, together with helpers/parents came over to Matakohe-Limestone Island for some education and adventure. We had a great day traipsing all over the island, up to the Pa site and down to the Manager's house for lunch. This was the first group I played an 'educational' trick on with the kiwi transmitter. Earlier that morning I set one up on the leg of a cardboard kiwi. We then diligently tracked this 'kiwi' and wrestled it out of the 'burrow', much to the amusement of all - me the most!



Which kiwi to use?

- I had an awesome group from Whangarei Intermediate School (two boat-loads) visit Matakoho-Limestone Island on a brilliantly sunny day. The view from the Pa site was amazing that day and the weta were playing ball. I love introducing these intricate invertebrates to people with the close up experience providing the usual screams then ohhhs and ahhs.



The girls and boys from Whangarei Intermediate and star teacher, Judy

- A group from my old primary school, Otaika Valley Primary, paid a visit and we had a great day. I have fond memories of this school and it was a pleasure to give something back. The kids liked the stoat traps and the "zombies" in the Manager's house basement.
- I had the pleasure of hosting Theresa Vujcich who works with Project Island Song in the Bay of Islands in the volunteer/education programme. She also does the propagating at the Kerikeri Shade House where we sourced some plants from many moons ago. She had a great informative day here and we enjoyed discussing both projects and exchanging some good ideas. They are doing an awesome job, going from strength to strength, many planned releases and reintroductions are in the pipeline there; keep an eye on this one.
- Dwane and Angela Kokich, together with friend Dallas have been coming over regularly nailing the Mexican Devil in their adopt-a-spot sites. There are still sites up for grabs and other regular volunteers are taking up the challenge. If you want to know more check out the website homepage and contact Dwane for a briefing.
- A group of Brazilian students from Kerikeri High School visited the island and we had a very enjoyable walk around. This group was organised through Shirley who is the educator at Kiwi North and does a great job up there at Maunu, educating people about New Zealand's special unique species.
- I gave a talk to a combined meeting of the five Northland Red Cross Branches at the Service Centre in Whangarei. This group of attentive listeners were 'super' interested in Matakoho-Limestone Island.
- Cathy Mitchell, petrel pesterer of the first order, came to give the cabin a once over as it was to be 'sardine smoothie headquarters' when the chicks arrived. The place has never looked so clean – it had to be super sterile. The benches were so shiny I could use them to see my reflection when shaving.
- While I was on Taranga, friends of mine Collette and Nick, island sat. They are keen, upcoming conservationists and apart from having a great time, did a fantastic job of not only looking after the island, but also setting up and getting the dignitaries over on the Oi Blessing/arrival day. Thanks guys and also Chloe and Emily for coming over and helping out.
- Regular Limestone islander, Angela and the crew from Otaika Pharmacy rocked over to celebrate their end of year 'do'. Owner Vicki, together with all the staff and their families had a great celebration. There was an enormous amount of food and drink supplied to feed the multitudes as not only were there a couple of barge loads, but also a few folk who arrived in private boats. We went for a quick stroll around the island where I entertained them with stories of native species and the island history. The icing on the cake was the generous donation to island funds Vicki gave which will certainly be put to good use.



- Murray and Andrew from Northland Parkcare Services flashed up the tracks while I was on Taranga. They did a great job and the tracks looked spic and span for the holiday rush.

Kiwi

- Pretty quiet on the kiwi front with Glen nearly due to have his egg hatch and island sitters Col and Nick on strict instructions to contact Ranger Rolf at DOC should his activity change. Good news is that Sir Ed is now also sitting on an egg(s) and his brood should hatch in a couple of months. This is great news as I only just got a transmitter on him after he had had two years on the run. These are the first eggs I have seen from him and, hopefully, will lead to a couple of chicks.
- One kiwi highlight was the release of our lovely girl, Hihiri, to the Mataia Restoration Project on the Kaipara Harbour. I picked up Pete Graham from DOC early on the morning of 29 November for the recapture of this bird, which proved to be very easy, and we had it in the box by 7:30.a.m. I then took Pete for a walk around the ruins as it had been some time since he had been here.

Hihiri had been running around with a transmitter for more than seven months and only the baby band was left holding the transmitter on when we caught her, phew! close one.

Other flora and fauna

- Variable Oystercatcher (VOC) and dotterel chicks are still everywhere, although some at a reduced number. The black back gulls and hawks were always the suspected predators. This changed when I recently saw a bigger VOC chick relentlessly attacking a smaller sibling ("siblicide"). This seems to be a trend with only the strongest chicks fledging. The dotterels also fledged one of the three chicks that hatched. There are still nests and chicks all over the island so watch your step when around the shoreline.
- The Hibiscus is fully in flower with some areas almost white with blooms, both species have great examples of these delicate short lived flowers so a good time to check them out. Funnily enough the area where I stored the smaller hibiscus (which subsequently grew and dropped a heap of seed) has started sprouting thousands of seedlings. Some of this soil I used in my garden so now, *Hibiscus richardsonii* everywhere!



Is that pumpkin richardsonii??

- I spotted a couple of our new Suter's skinks during a random daytime check of the area where we released them. Hopefully there are more of these left and I guess I will find that out during the upcoming lizard monitoring.
- There are heaps of other chicks, or juveniles of the species, around at the moment and they seem more inquisitive. There are fantails, banded rails, caspian terns, fernbirds, kingfishers and of course the petrels, to name just a few. Now is a good time to pay the island a visit as not only is the weather more settled but it is a great time to get up close to these friendly island birds.

Predator control

- Ross and Michelle have been active over at Onerahi and have a new guy on board, Tony a friend of Ross. He has done quite a number of days on the Onerahi Rat Patrol (ORP) and is now an honorary member of this small exclusive group. Tony gets to wear the fluro shirt of ratty doom and help keep this area free of pests. Remember to say hi and thank these guys if you see them around Onerahi, they are keeping your backyard pest free! Thanks Tony and welcome on board, and Michelle and Ross of course.

- Ben, my awesome practicum worker has taken over filling the South side bait stations; he is already up to RRs line with only another 16 needing doing. I think I will give him a break and finish the rest myself. It gives me peace of mind knowing these are filled and even better to know they are all in resealable plastic bags. Ben is doing this work purely voluntarily and my hat goes off to him for his enthusiasm.
- Bevan has been doing the rounds, both on the buffer and on the island with not much to report. A few measly rats and a stoat, along with the regular hits of mice have been the only hits on the buffer. The predicted late season would appear to mean the predator spike is also delayed.
- Remember, it is possible that pests can hitch-hike a ride from boats housed in garages over winter. Upon landing these pests 'abandon ship' which, hopefully, is not on this island. If you are coming over **please** have a good look in the crevices in your boat, especially for angry Argentine ants and invasive Rainbow skinks.

General

- Our sponsor, Golden Bay Cement, has upgraded my gumboots, these are pretty flash and I will keep them for best for now. Cheers Theda
- Mowing-mowing-mowing, it never ends! Sometimes feels like a war - me, my little orange tractor and the big red slasher against the seed heads and tall grass on the tracks.
- I hope the Oi appreciate how much work has been put in to make their burrows acceptable. Most volunteers and even some visitors have been roped in to get this area ready for the incoming babies. I was kept busy cooking some of the meals for the trip to Taranga as well as doing loads of shopping. Preparing for quarantine was also a bit of a mission with every speck of dirt and seed needing to be removed from any gear going to Taranga Island. However, this is always a good excuse to buy some new clothes and socks.
- Not only is the grass on the tracks and the native plants/trees doing well, but weeds seem to be taking over the island. I have not only been intensively spraying the grass under the trees with the tractor but also backpack spraying heaps as well. Bevan, the trapper, has also been roped into some spraying, doing around his traps and bait-stations. As well as this, Dwane and I have hand pulled hundreds of moth plants, Taiwan cherry, periwinkle, ginger and pampas.

Upcoming

- As you will have guessed, the Oi have kept me occupied over the last few weeks, hence late publication of this report but Volunteer Wednesday did go ahead on 7 January – I will update next report.
- The up-coming yearly check of the island's seven fire extinguishers reminded me it's fire season now. Friendly reminder... **if you see smoke or anything suspicious on the island please call 111 immediately** and they'll respond appropriately.

Finally, although a little belated

MY VERY BEST WISHES TO ALL FOR 2015

Bernie



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