



Matakohē-Limestone Island Rangers' Report January 2017

It's the time of the Big Dry. As the island dries out, the soil is cracking and the plants are dying back. We haven't had real rain on the island since early November, the northern dam is a dust bowl and the flax fields dam is almost dry too. Every afternoon the Fire Weather Index moves up into Extreme Fire Danger territory.



Island or Dryland? Typical soil conditions near the Manager's House loo

Visitors and Volunteers, and Other Comings and Goings

- We had some special guests in December in the form of Ben Barr, with Penny and Timmy. While they were here Ben gave Emma a hand to catch Kicker the Kiwi ready for transfer that afternoon, while all the kids looked on. It was lovely to spend time with them, and very special to see Penny and Timmy re-connecting with the island and its inhabitants.
- We were lucky to have first John Ward and Karin, and then WDC Councillor Anna Murphy and family come out to island sit for us the week after Christmas. It was great to get away and visit with friends and family, secure in the knowledge the island was in good hands. Thanks guys!
- We have had visits from two school holiday programmes in January, Kohatu and Hopscotch. These visits have been a little mellower than the typical school tour as we have to be more covert in teaching them about the island so they don't feel they are in class. It is amazing how much they are learning without realising it
- Over the last nine months we have refined our tour of the island and our mental 'scripts' as we have taken groups around, figuring out what works and what doesn't. Things we have learned since we started include getting the terrestrial health and safety briefing done as soon as the kids step off the boat, rather than five minutes later when they have already hit their heads in the cellar of the Manager's House; explaining early on that limestone is white, not green like the fruit/ice cream colour; and that the story about the young girl visiting the island whose arm was blown off with a filched detonator during an altercation with some local children is always popular!
- We also had a lovely pre-Christmas visit from former Whangarei Heads Primary Principal, Lil Ogle (and Emma's aunt) with her walking group and a few other family members for a walk around and a stunning looking picnic; and a visit from FOMLI Chair Pam and family.

- Volunteer Wednesday happened a week later than usual, in order to accommodate those who might still have been on holiday. Work continued on stripping old fencing materials, lots of weeding (particularly periwinkle, blackberry and thistles), and a fantastic extension of the deck around the caravan for visitors. We were particularly grateful for the help of Steve and Keith in getting dirty water for the garden pumped up from the flax fields dam; not easy when there was no water in the pipe to prime the pump due to having to replace a broken ball valve and tap fitting, and the very low level of the water in the dam. With a bit of ingenuity and a lot of patience it all worked in the end and the tanks are back at a respectable level again, much to the relief of the vege garden.
- Also, Delice, the Kokichs and friends came out to the island to celebrate a birthday and do some work on their adoptaspot. Volunteer Anna, her nephew Darius, and Steve came out for a day at the start of the month to do some work and we also had a group visiting for a fourth birthday party at the ruins. The Waipapa continues to bring people out on Sundays and we are starting to see more and more boats and kayaks pulled up on the beach and yachts anchored, and bump into people as we go about the island.
- As well as our post-Christmas trip off the island, Emma and the boys spent two nights on Motuarohia/Roberton Island with friends who are the caretakers of part of the island for the owners. It was good to visit a different island and see some of the differences and similarities in managing these off-shore gems, so big thanks Hongi, Kara and whanau for hosting us.

Predator Control

- We have been catching the odd stoat and rat in the buffer traps but nothing is making it out to the island at the moment.
- Our woolly ovine plant predator Lamby is now happily enclosed within the improved ruins fence, and her six aunts and uncles haven't managed a breakout since the fence repairs either. Lamby continues to be a hit with small children but is thankfully showing less and less active interest in people, and more and more interest in grass munching.

Flora and Fauna

Plants

Freddy Tito and friends, along with a cameraman from Channel North returned to the island last Friday to check on progress with the heritage kumara planted in late November. The plants have suffered from some initial pukeko predation (before wire mesh covers were hastily installed) and the big dry and still require watering every few days but five kumara are surviving despite the difficult conditions.



You can see an earlier story on the planting by Te Hiku TV and the Haukainga news programme here: https://tehiku.nz/te-hiku-tv/haukainga/4659/2016-11-30-matakohe-island-youtube_01

Elsewhere, last season's plantings under the existing canopy appear to be hanging in there and the mountain flaxes around Badham's Knob seem quite happy, but the established trees are starting to look a bit sad in some areas, particularly the young mahoe which appear to be prone to wilting in the dry conditions.

Northland Parkcare came and did a sterling job on track maintenance as usual, just before Christmas. Since then growth has been very slow so the tracks are still in great condition now, which is good news for all the island visitors. Jono has been spraying around the petrel station and hill track over the summer as being in the lee and with a well-established canopy, there was still plenty of weed growth into the New Year.

Kiwi

Just before Christmas island kiwi, Kicker the Kiwi, was released at Tawapou. The farewell at the Onerahi foreshore was very well attended with more than 60 onlookers. Emma is now starting to go out after dark to search for more kiwi ready to be moved back to the mainland next month.

We have transferred another chick to the island from Rarewarewa via Todd Hamilton. Emma released the bird after dark at the northern dam several days before the water completely dried. The last we saw of the kiwi it was happily probing away enjoying breakfast. Two other kiwi were released here by Todd Hamilton while we were away after Christmas, with Anna Murphy and her family being thrilled to watch.



Kicker the Kiwi farewell

Other Fauna

We are enjoying watching the shorebirds chicks hatched this summer, growing up. All three oyster catcher chicks rescued by Charlie last month are still around the sand barge with their parents, which is heartening to see as most clutches seem to reduce to single chicks towards the end. We are still seeing dotterel chicks there too, some nearing fledge. We have also noticed a duck and ducklings at the flax fields dam when we have been pumping water, and have also observed many godwits on the wing while going across the channel.

We are starting to find a lot of dead birds, particularly starlings, around the Badham's/School track intersection and between the Edge House ruins and the Ski Slope track, but we have also come across a dead Kingfisher, a dead fernbird, and a dead white-fronted tern. We presume most of these are due to natural causes, potentially young birds who haven't figured out how to forage adequately post-fledge. We have the white-fronted tern in a cage in the wind to dessicate, after which we will check to see if ocean-going rubbish was involved in its demise.

In mid-January the Society for Research on Reptiles and Amphibians of New Zealand has its annual conference and AGM in Whangarei. Former MLI Ranger Ben Barr has arranged for a fieldtrip to the island on Sunday, 22 January as part of the Conference programme, so we look forward to having the focus firmly on lizards for the day.

Other Events

- Thanks to the WDC and Northland Waste we had another four big bins of rubbish removed from the island just before Christmas, most of which was picked up from the beach. It just keeps on coming!
- A broken grease nipple was removed and replaced on Petrel Tua Toru with the help of Jono from Marine North.

Odd Stuff and Old Stuff

The alignment of roads and railway lines and the position of wharves has always been the subject of great debate in Whangarei. Until the early 1880's the Town Wharf at what is now the Town Basin, was the transportation hub of the area, but the shallow water there was always an impediment. The Lower or Railway Wharf at the deep water at Kioreroa was established in 1881- 1882, but due to the presence of a sandstone bar which still prevented easy access to larger ships, was itself replaced by the Onerahi Wharf and railway branch line at the turn of the century. In the late 1920's the sandstone bar was cut away and the wharf returned to Kioreroa, where thousands of acres of new land were claimed from the mudflats by relief work gangs during the Great Depression. Though linked by the railway line, the re-established port was not joined to Whangarei by road until 1936 when Port Road was built around the Hoey orchard at Okara hill, and over the mudflats at Limeburners Creek.

During this period numerous proposals to improve access to Whangarei were flown in the Northern Advocate and noted in papers further afield. Here for your enjoyment is one such for a new rail and wharf development involving Limestone Island, provided to the Northern Advocate by "Kai-Tuhi-Tuhi" and published on 31 August 1901 (sourced from www.paperspast.co.nz). Oh, what might have been!

The proposal that I have to make is to branch off from the Opau railway station, and follow the foreshore round to Otaika river, cross that river and thence by the foreshore to the point Onemama, and from thence to Limestone Island across the boat channel; and by the north side of Limestone Island to the best and deepest water, and the most suitable site for a wharf, which would be opposite to the site fixed for the wharf at the Grahamtown side of the channel. And now for the reasons which would appear to be favourable to this proposed route—1st There would be no compensation required on this route, as the line would go along the foreshore all the way to the Otaika, it is flat hard sandstone rock, requiring little formation. After leaving the Otaika channel it would cross tidal flats to the point called Tapu Point, would cross there and on to the Onemama, across the boat channel there would be a bridge of small span, thence to the reef on the Limestone Island side and on to the site where the wharf could be built shortest to deep water. The distance from the present railway station at Opau to Limestone is from 4½ to 5 miles and might be safely estimated to cost £30,000 or about half what the proposed line to Grahamtown will cost, i.e. £40,000 to £50,000.

2nd. This line would not interfere with the navigation of the Whangarei or Mangapai rivers in any way, and the dredging would not cost the other half of the vote.

3rd. If the timber people or coal shippers preferred to continue to ship their stuff from the present railway wharf they might do so.

4th. It would make use of the present railway without any alteration as to stations, or trade centres.

5th. The railway terminus at Limestone Island would be nearer than any other to the back country such as Maungakarama, Waikeke, Rururangi, etc, a country of very considerable extent already settled. The produce could be brought down in light narrow gauge trams, and would be of more importance to these settlements than the through railway that has been talked of so long, viz Maungaturoto.

Charlie Chat

We had a friend, he was a baby sparrow. He used to fly around our house and we could catch him and give him cuddles. He was so cute and fluffy. He always went "cheep". But unfortunately one day we found him dead by our back steps. We made a nice grave for him and buried him in a birds nest. I put a whau leaf on the bottom of the nest to rest him in and I also put one on top like a blanket. The grave even has a head stone written in my own hand. We will miss him so much and I will never forget him. We love him so much.

Quincy Quote

A little sparrow died and we love him so much. He made us very happy. And he died. We have a vege garden and it's very big. If we took the deck off the house, the garden would be bigger than our house. One time we couldn't pump water from a lake far away at the ruins and we couldn't pump it then it started going and we can grow veges again now so that's good. My favourite veges are the little tomatoes.

Finally

Don't forget to mark the date of the next **Volunteer Wednesday on 1 February** pickup from the Onerahi Jetty at 0900 as usual.



Proudly supported by; Environmental Northland, Forest Floor Nursery, Harbour Marine Ltd, Marine North Ltd, Northpower, Northland Port Corp, Northland Regional Council, North Tugz, Onerahi Lions, Phoenix Boats, Red Bull Powder Co., Tawapou Nursery.

www.limestoneisland.org.nz