



## Matakohē-Limestone Island Rangers' Report February 2017

The Big Dry continues with 24mm of rain in January and another 24mm at the start of February not being enough to dampen things down for more than a couple of days. The island is covered in cracks large enough to swallow a small child! (or at least, his foot). The Fire Weather Index continues to climb into Extreme most afternoons and the trees continue to struggle with the lack of moisture, but more rain is on the horizon for the middle of February (yay!).



Not quite "Man Bites Dog"  
more "Island Bites Boy"

### Visitors and Volunteers, and Other Comings and Goings

- We had another good turnout for Volunteer Wednesday with a big raid on periwinkle and other nasties, finishing off the ruins' fence repairs, spraying in advance of this year's planting season and releasing plants. The overnight rain in late January wet things down enough for us to feel comfortable getting Dave over to do a mow on the north face (thanks again Dave). Dwane and Steve also came out to chop up some rabbits for bait, to be salted, air dried and bagged by Emma and Jono. We have enough rabbit for the next few months but please keep an ear out anyone with bunnies going spare!
- We had a group of ten out from the Society for Research on Amphibians and Reptiles of New Zealand (SRARNZ) annual conference to discuss the lizard translocations to the island, with former ranger Ben Barr. The tour took in the various release sites for Pacific Geckos, Suters Skinks, Shore Skinks, Green Geckos, and Forest Geckos with examples of Suters, Shore, Ornate and Copper Skinks and a Bell frog being caught and examined. Ben gave us all a rundown of how the various translocations went down, and the ongoing monitoring.
- More than 80 people caught the MV "Waipapa out" to the island to participate in the Whangarei Hash House Harriers run around the island on 8 February. Angela, Dwane and some helpers came over to set up on Tuesday morning and that afternoon the mercury hit the low thirties, but on Wednesday the skies clouded over and the temperature dropped. Following the run, beverages, bangers on the bbq and some strange and secret rites and rituals, the troop departed just before the rain began.
- We had some lovely visits from family in January, some with bounty from their gardens. Our own island garden is looking a bit sad as we carefully curate the last of our 'dirty water' supply but we are still getting lots of lovely tomatoes, a few courgettes and strawberries, and kale, with a good crop of potatoes coming on.
- We have had plenty of visitors getting to the island under their own steam or with the help of the Waipapa this month. We have bumped into more than 170 visitors to the island since the start of January, not including those we have brought over ourselves or who have arrived on the Waipapa on Sunday tours or part of the Hash House Harriers.



- Kevin, Luke and Johnny from Black Cat Steel came over to assess the welding required to fix the barge hatch. Located at Lower Port Road, Black Cat is potentially an easier destination and avoids having to take the barge right into town, and having to travel with the island barge trailer strapped underneath to get to another workshop.

## **Predator Control**

We have started seeing pests turn up on the island, with a stoat trapped at the ruins and a weasel caught on the sand spit this month. We are planning another mouse bust in February and will advertise in due course. We currently have lots of broken rat traps and have ordered some replacement triggers for them, which is cheaper and more eco-friendly than replacing the whole trap, so we will see how that goes.

## **Flora and Fauna**

### **Plants**

Some of last season's plantings under the existing canopy are getting stressed as the lack of rain starts to tell. The pest plants keep coming however, with moth plant and periwinkle to tackle and some relatively large Taiwan Cherry trees spotted by Dwane in the bush behind the Recreation Hall ruins. The volunteers also had a good crack at some Queen of the Night this month.



**Dwane, Dave, Steve and Quincy conquer the Queen of the Night and Charlie with a moth plant he spotted**

**"Fun Gus" on log by School site**

Wendy Holland came over for a walk around with Emma and Dwane to firm up planting plans for 2017. Some changes to current order with Tawapou Native Nurseries were made including more astelias for the really dry and nutrient-poor areas, and some different coprosmas. Thanks go to Sandra at Tawapou for accommodating changes and to Wendy for her expertise and continued interest in the island restoration.

Emma has been undertaking the occasional circuit of the island by boat, checking for moth plant as the flowers can be spotted from the water. It has worked well as one vine was removed with lots of flowers and a few small pods forming. She also found a flowering moth plant vine right next to the mown track on the north face near the pa, a spot we travel past regularly – its amazing what you can miss!

Jono, Dwane and Allan spot sprayed around the northern end of the island in preparation for this coming planting season. The proposal is to pocket plant out from established areas of plantings into neighbouring bare areas, from the shoreline between the barge landing and the northern quarry, to the steep ground above, and between the ranger station and the small quarry to the west.

### **Kiwi**

We have transferred another chick to the island from west of Whangarei via Todd Hamilton. Emma was also busy this month "transmitting" kiwi and then monitoring them in advance of the release on 12 February. Todd, son Jack and Adam Willetts came over for an evening in late January and before the crew called it quits at 2am eight birds were caught of which five were large enough to take off the island.

The dry weather is hard on kiwi as they get most of their moisture from food, so foraging time and distance increases as the food supply dwindles. Emma encountered one young bird on the track between the caravan and helipad about 40 minutes before sunset a couple of weeks ago. It was still in good condition but was probably out before dark to wet its whistle. The kiwi have been pretty quiet at night in general for the last few months, but Jono heard one calling after the last light evening shower at the start of February. They are still calling.

The big release happened on Sunday 12 February, out at McLeods Bay at Whangarei Heads. The day began a little early For Emma, Todd and son Billy, and Ngfaire Tyson from the NZ Landcare Trust who were out chasing the birds before 8am and had them rounded up by 9.15. The Whakawaatea at the boat ramp at Onerahi was well attended with approximately 60 people turning up to farewell the birds and hear the kiwi conservation message. Later that day Emma went out to assist with the release at McLeod's Bay, where more than four hundred people turned out for the event. All three birds, named Taputini (in honour of kumara returning to the island), Pakipaki (named by Whangarei Heads School), and Dudin (named for a local family) were sent off in style. You can view photos from the event at <https://www.facebook.com/BackyardKiwi/>.

### **Other Fauna**

Two of the oyster catcher chicks rescued by Charlie, now named White Pants and Grey Pants, are still hanging around with their parents between the sand barge and concrete steps, with another couple of oyster catchers taking up residence atop the front wall of the Managers House (we haven't seen this before).



**White Pants, Grey Pants and parent**

We have enjoyed watching a kahu (harrier hawk) riding the thermals above the ridge off and on over the last few weeks, despite what it means for some of our feathered friends further down the food chain. Nature red in tooth and claw, indeed. Most of the nesting adult sea birds and chicks on the sand at Knight Island have now left with just a couple of adults remaining.

Despite the difficult weather we have also seen fern bird and banded rail chicks around the ranger station in the last few weeks, along with the somewhat hardier baby pukeko. Having come across one accidentally and scaring it into a flax near the bottom of the School Site track, Emma was able to (briefly) undertake her first pukeko chick examination. Suffice to say the handling was brief and soon concluded to the relief of both parties. Charlie was also pleased to have been able to catch a pukeko chick and examine it after it was encountered at the barge landing and tried unsuccessfully to escape over the stack of wharf piles. "It only bit my legs a couple of times" when asked if he had been got, and having been trying to run one down for a couple of weeks to see what makes them tick, he was pretty pleased with his success.

### Other Events

Emma and Petrel Tua Toru assisted technicians from Opus with a survey of the underside of the GBC wharf at Portland, requiring about six hours of holding position under various parts of the structure while the two technicians undertook their measurements. It was hot work holding the boat in position over the course of the survey, with the experience enlivened by watching the robot train trundle its way back and forth along the wharf. It looks like Emma will have another commission to do likewise under the Te Pohe a Matau bascule bridge in town in the near future.

Colin from Wormald also met us at the Onerahi boatramp for the annual check of our fire extinguishers. One had expired and was replaced, and we now have a semi-dud to practice with.

In case you missed it, the Haukainga show put up a great interview with Emma, filmed during the weeding of the kumara last month. Check it out at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6H8KUEBLKmg&feature=share>.

We had a good view of the big fire at Springfield (approx 20km south of Whangarei) at the start of February. We had heard the sirens and then Jono noticed smoke above the pa site. While we were pretty sure it wasn't the island going off, Emma and Charlie ran up the hill to see what was happening. Later, Charlie said he saw something land in the bush near the School Site and a few days later Emma found cinders along the fire break at the bottom of the North Face (at least we know it works!). Thanks to the mainland trapper who phoned to check it wasn't us. Good reminder to be vigilant.



### Odd Stuff about Old Stuff

Visitors to the island seem bemused when Jono tells them the track they are walking along used to be a railway line. What started out as a horse-drawn tramway became a railway line from the north eastern corner of the island back along Shipwreck Bay to the cement works. Here is a photo of the old horse-drawn tramway (pretty sure the fellow leading the horse ended up in the Village People!) and the new steam driven railway from the Auckland Weekly News, provided via the Auckland Public Library Heritage Images database. Tim Clarke's book says the MLI train is at MOTAT so if anyone is going there in the next little while keep a lookout for it

Other notable tramways in the area include the Whau Valley tramway which ran from Whau Valley, from the coal mines to Mair's Landing on the Hatea River, and the steep incline tramways which are still visible between the ballast pit (scoria quarry for railway embankments) in the middle of the Onoke Scenic Reserve and the railway, in Kamo. A cutting for a tramway to move kauri down to the Mangapai River is still visible on the hillside east of SH1 between Totara and Hewlett Road.



Auckland Weekly News, 19 June 1913. APL AWNS-19130619-6-2.

### Finally

Don't forget to mark the date of the next **Volunteer Wednesday on 1 March**, pickup from the Onerahi Jetty at 0900 as usual. Also, we are planning an archaeology-themed public open day in early April to celebrate NZ Archaeology Week established by the NZ archaeology Association so keep an eye out as details are ironed out.



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.

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