

Island Time

Issue 2



Update on Birds and other Biodiversity on Matakohē/Limestone Island

Gerry Brackenbury

Probably one of the more common public perceptions of a natural sanctuary such as Matakohē/Limestone is that it is seen as a "bird sanctuary". This is understandable as perhaps the most obvious evidence of life in a park is the sight and sound of birds. Birds can be classed as "indicator species", if there are lots of birds around then the eco-system is probably reasonably intact. Since the arrival of man to New Zealand, avian fauna has received a near fatal blow with one of the highest bird extinction rates in the world. This is due primarily to the introduction of alien predators, aided and abetted by habitat loss. The current work being done on Matakohē/Limestone Island is a tiny attempt to reverse this trend. Recently while at a conference in Rotorua, I gave a presentation on the work being done for kiwi recovery in the North, covering both the work being done by DOC staff plus that being done by the community. Matakohē/Limestone Island featured strongly of course, being one of two chick crèches, in which eggs are hatched at the Whangarei Bird Recovery Centre and Auckland Zoo, and are taken as chicks to either Motuora Island in the Hauraki Gulf or Matakohē/Limestone Island. When the birds reach 1200 grams they are taken to Bream Head to start a new kiwi population. The system, known as Operation Nestegg (ONE), has been made possible by the major sponsorship of the Bank of New Zealand. The bank has just created a new Trust (BNZKRT) which will generate more funding for communities to save our national bird.

Currently there are 15 kiwis on the island; four adults, 2 sub-adults from last year and nine chicks put on this year. Of the adults, two birds are "island-sitting" while the Heritage Park at Maunu is building its new Kiwi house. When completed the two birds

will be returned to start a new life in their new home. Last summer, the male, Manuiti was found sitting on an egg! Unfortunately it was infertile, but this is probably the first time in many hundreds of years that a kiwi has laid an egg on the island. We must be winning!

Another exciting event has been the arrival of two fern birds on the island. These turned up around two months ago, and probably came from somewhere near Portland, home of Golden Bay Cement, our sponsors. The bird is found in low numbers around the Whangarei Harbour, with a possible breeding population at Takahiwai. We hope that in a few years we may have our own stable population on the island. The fernbird is endemic to N.Z. It is a weak flyer; preferring to skulk around vegetation where it feeds on invertebrates such as caterpillars, spiders and flies. Its numbers crashed with the destruction of wetlands (we have removed over 90% of our wetlands for agriculture) and introduction of predators. It has a longish, spiky tail that it uses to shamble among the low vegetation and weeds. It has an unusual call - involving a mechanical double call consisting of one low and one sharp note. The male makes the low note and the female immediately responds with a high note, sounding like one call.

This year has been a good breeding season for the N.Z. dotterel, four chicks were successfully fledged and I suspect another two made it through. The oystercatchers produced ten fledged chicks - kia ora torea! While walking the island last year, I found the chewed up remains of a rare small petrel called Cook's Petrel (*Pterodroma cookii*). This beautiful little seabird is only found breeding at two sites; one on Little Barrier Island and the other at Codfish Island, off Stewart Island. This one was from



The old wharf on Matakohē/Limestone is popular with the birds

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Little Barrier and may have been a young bird that was killed by a hawk.

In the future we hope that we may be able to establish a breeding population of petrel on the island. This would reverse the trend for one more New Zealand bird, which will benefit from the many friends of Matakohē.

If you want to help make a difference, join us to plant trees this winter, starting May 18th.



Onerahi School Children clean up the beach during a visit to the island

Editorial

Sandy Page

The last six months have been busy ones for the island, with increasing numbers of nesting birds and visitors of the human variety. Despite the dry spring, most of the trees we planted last year are flourishing, and we have had a reasonable survival rate. There is always a certain amount of loss in the first year after planting, as some parts of the planting areas have little topsoil, are almost pure limestone, and very prone to drying out.

More visitors are coming to the island to have a picnic, explore the ruins and walk around the island. Over the summer, a wedding party even arranged to come over and have their photos taken by the ruins.

As mentioned in the last newsletter, we have been working hard to secure a larger dwelling for our ranger Colin and his family. This will allow the current cabin to be moved and developed into a volunteer shelter. This will be available for volunteers when they are on the island, to shelter from the weather, make a cup of tea and have somewhere dry to put clothes and equipment. We hope this will be a lot more comfortable than the

tractor shed, where people have sheltered in the past.

We have been successful in getting a grant from ASB to assist with this project, and hope to start the building process soon.

Colin will be very involved coordinating these projects, and would appreciate anyone who might be able to spend a day on the island helping with some of the ongoing chores – track maintenance, trap checking and baiting, etc. If anyone might be able to help, please ring Colin and discuss things with him.

Membership payments are due for this year. If you have overlooked this, or misplaced the form which came with the AGM information, another form will be mailed with this newsletter. Although it is not a great amount, we rely on your support to continue work on the island.

Hopefully we will see many of you on the island for planting days this winter.

We still have copies of the book 'More Than Just a Little Island' A History of Matakohē/Limestone Island available. Anyone wishing to buy one can ring Dwane Kokich or Sandy Page to arrange this.

Memorial Planting Day

Mary Tuitubou will be sadly missed. She has been a long-term supporter of Forest and Bird and FOMLI. She very often managed to persuade family and friends onto the island on planting days. She also collected articles and photos of the island over a number of years, which is a wonderful record.

A memorial planting day is being arranged with family and we will notify members and friends as soon as possible.



Oystercatchers on the island

FOMLI Contacts

Names, email addresses and phone numbers have now (Oct 2012) been removed from this document for privacy reasons, many are also no longer applicable or relevant. Please visit our website:

www.limestoneisland.org.nz

2003 Planting Season

Preparation for the 2003 planting season is well underway. In fact plants were ordered for this planting season 2 years ago from two commercial nurseries: - Taupo Native Plants and the more local Tawapou Coastal Natives. Both these nurseries eco-source the plant material for us to ensure we use local varieties. Funding for these plants comes from our Golden Bay Cement grant. In addition we are growing our own plants to augment the plant numbers at FOMLI's Golden Bay Cement Nursery at Portland. In all we will have around 80 species and about 20,000 plants to plant this year. It is a major effort to get all these plants over to the island - but the Onerahi Lions Club/ Pub charity sponsored boat Petrel II makes this task a bit easier. An extra activity we have to do this year is ensure that we don't transport Argentine Ants over to the island with our plants.

The planting sites have been prepared by blanket spraying with gallant/oil mix to ensure the plants get off to a good start without having to compete with the buffalo grass - the sprayed grass will act as mulch - this also makes planting easier having a clear site. The Whangarei District Council has assisted this task by funding the helicopter spraying of the planting sites. In fact, the Skyworks helicopter carried out the spraying operation on Thursday 13th March.



Aerial Spraying in action



Plants headed to the island

Our planting season is generally from May to September and the following dates have been selected because they correspond with high tides making our boat operation easier.

Sunday 18 May
 Saturday 31 May and Sunday 1 June (weekender)
 Sunday 15 June
 Sunday 19 June
 Sunday 13 July
 Saturday 26 and Sunday 27 July (weekender)
 Sunday 10 August
 Sunday 24 August
 Sunday 7 September

In addition your group may wish to organize a planting day during the week, by arrangement with the ranger, Colin Bishop.

Remember to bring your spade, wet weather gear, lunch and drink. Listen to your local radio station for cancellation news or contact a committee member.

Ranger Station and Volunteer Shelter

Thanks to a lot of teamwork by FOMLI members, & the generosity of the ASB Charitable Trust and Stuart Ross of Sunshine Homes, work has started to replace the ranger station.

The existing cabin is to be moved sideways, and become a day shelter for volunteers and people working on the island, and a new, larger building will be erected to provide more living space for Colin & Wendy, and an office for Colin. This will provide a much needed space for the ranger to work from, and keep the business of running the island away from their domestic space. Both buildings will have decks on the sunny, seaward side to maximise living space.

The new building is a two bedroom Sunshine

Cottage, and Stuart Ross is again undaunted by the challenges of building on an island. He and his builders have already assisted in moving the current cottage to its new site, and when it is finished, will deliver the new house, knocked down & packed into two containers to the Onerahi foreshore. From here we will use the Petrel II to transport the pieces across to the island for re-assembly.

This should be well underway by the end of May, and hopefully finished before the winter rain sets in.

There will be times when Colin will need extra help, for deck building and site preparation. If you may be able to assist, please let him know.



An unwelcome guest!

Life on the Island Colin Bishop - Resident Ranger

It is now nine months since I left the mainland and became an 'islander' throwing in a job in town for life on Matakoke-Limestone Island. Wendy and I have settled in well, and with lots of support from the committee (especially Pam and Grant Stevens and family) the transition has gone smoothly. Wendy works in town and I drop her across to Onerahi each morning and pick her up in the evenings. To date she has only been late for work once due to sea conditions, although we've winter still to come.

It has been interesting to watch the seasonal changes on the island. We caught the tail end of last winter and the planting season, when the area around the residence was a sea of mud. Spring brought the finches over to the island in large numbers, and the resident birds began nesting. The flax snails were introduced and the shoreline was dotted with well-camouflaged shorebird eggs and chicks. We had a very good nesting season with most nesting pairs of shorebirds getting at least one fully-fledged chick away and in a number of cases three. One pair of Northern NZ dotterels had two clutches of eggs, which is rare.

The island really dried out over the summer, but luckily we had a couple of good down pours of rain along with regular heavy dew, which kept the flora and fauna ticking over. We confirmed that NI fernbird have made it over to the island under their own steam with at least two birds resident on the island. As we move into autumn we're preparing for the next planting season, trying to reduce the mud factor and looking forward to a new, larger residence, which we hope to have on site and livable before winter takes hold. With luck, this will reduce the risk of cabin fever taking hold, as the existing residence is not much bigger than a nail box.



Life on the island is never dull. There is a huge amount of work to do, which keeps me flat-out along with regular chores such as monitoring, maintenance, mowing, predator/pest control and public relations. We have a large number of school groups along with clubs, societies and other interested groups regularly visiting the island. On the predator front, we are still battling to eradicate mice from the island. This is very labour intensive, so if there are any keen volunteers out there, give me a call. We catch one rat every month (approximately) in our traps, although there are a few more around at this time of the year. Rats are great swimmers, so this will be an ongoing battle. I caught a stoat over by the ruins recently. Again these vicious animals are great swimmers and juveniles head out each year in search of new territory. We have just finished surveying the island for Argentine ants. Thankfully it looks like these pests have not become established on the island. We will have to be very vigilant during planting seasons, as ants love to make nests in potted plants, and this is the

most likely vehicle in which Argentine ants would travel to the island. All plants are to be chemically treated before transfer.

We have 15 kiwis at the moment, four adults, two adolescents and nine chicks. The birds we are monitoring are doing well and the adults living in the vicinity of our cabin have been very vocal. They often bed down for the day nearby, and on occasion settle in under the cabin itself.

Remember the island is a scenic reserve and open to all except dogs and pets/pests. Nothing is to be taken off the island, except your rubbish.

Hope to see you at the planting days – Colin



Photo provided courtesy of Blue Orb

Golden Bay Cement Sponsorship

We are delighted with the news that Golden Bay Cement is to continue to sponsor the restoration project for another five years. They have a long historical association with the island and their generosity has enabled the island project to make very significant progress.

We are relieved now that we have some funding guaranteed. We will continue to work to seek to supplement it with grants. Our previous sponsorship finishes in July and the committee will be looking to celebrate the start of a new five year agreement.

