

Petrel Heads: Theda Hall's personal account of collecting grey-faced petrel chicks



Taranga, (Hen) Island, home to tui, wood pigeon, kaka, bellbird, tuatara, grey-faced petrel and, for one week in December, home to 6 intrepid petrel chick translocators. This was the 5th and final year of a grey-faced petrel translocation project, from Taranga to what they will hopefully recognise as their new home on Matakoho-Limestone Island; situated in the Whangarei Harbour.

The grey-faced petrel, or northern mutton bird, is a small, oceanic petrel which only come onto land to breed and raise their chicks. They lay a single egg in a burrow, which may be used for generations by the same family and have a long incubation period. Due to predation on the mainland, they are now only found on isolated headlands and offshore islands such as the Hen and Chicks.

The translocation project began in 2004, initiated and run by Friends of Matakoho-Limestone Island (FOMLI), of which Golden Bay Cement (GBC) is a major sponsor. The project itself was funded by World Wildlife Fund - NZ and the Tindall Foundation. With the last of this years batch flying off to sea by mid January, the project has now seen 151 petrels successfully fledged.



▲ Theda holding one of the downy petrel chicks

This years collection team were Cathy Mitchell, one of the resident Limestone Island rangers and vet, her son Matt, Grant Stevens and Lawrie Mead, who are well seasoned volunteers associated with FOMLI and the camps master chefs, Rowan Keys, a representative of Ngatiwai, and myself, as a representative of GBC and FOMLI.

The collection of the petrel chicks involved 2 days of hiking up the steep slopes to locate the petrel burrows. The downy chicks are 'extracted' by hand, usually with some protest from the chick, which may try to defend itself by way of 'fishy' projectile vomit or bites from its hooked beak. Some burrows are too long for arms to reach the chick, so a small hole is dug in over the nest chamber to allow access, then covered with a stone lid to ensure the burrow can still be used next season. All chicks found are weighed and measured and only those that fit the criteria are short listed and returned to their burrows. If chicks are too old, they may have already been outside their burrow and imprinted on the Hen as their home, too late to create the illusion that Limestone Island is home.

Lawrie, Theda and Matt heading back down to camp with the final eight birds ▼



Two days later, more hiking up to locate the suitable birds and, if they still make the cut, they are loaded into backpack boxes to be taken down to camp 4 at a time. With 40 chicks to collect and only 4 back packs, you can imagine the amount of hill climbing that was done that day. Cathy and I were the measurers, and so didn't carry any chicks down to camp. Now, you might think that we had the easy job, but don't forget we had to handle about 20 chicks each, and many were the puking, biting type, so we ended up with a few fishy badges and sore spots by the end of the day. At least I can now say I am an official 'petrel head'.

During their time on Limestone Island, each chick lives in its own man made burrow at the 'Petrel Station', situated high on a slope, facing down the harbour. The chicks are fed a diet of sardine smoothies and their growth is monitored, until they are ready to

fledge. First they will emerge from their burrows to familiarise themselves with their home. When conditions are right, they will take flight for the first time and head out to sea, where they spend most of their lives. Depending on their age, this can take 4 to 6 weeks. They will not return for 5 to 7 years to breed, recognising Limestone Island as their home from just the few times they saw it as a fledgling.

It was hoped 'early returners' may have begun to arrive back at the Petrel Station this year. But, despite playing petrel calls over loud speakers at the site, no grey-faced petrels returned this season. With all this seasons birds now fledged, all we can do is 'keep watching the skies'.

This article has been adapted from the original by Theda Hall, GBC Environment Technician, which appeared in 'The Heat', a regular internal communication produced by GBC for its staff.

