

Motuora Restoration Society

Chairperson's Report for 2018-2019

May 2019

Our relationship with the Department of Conservation

One of our most important relationships is undoubtedly that with the Department. They are the legal entity responsible for managing the Island and everything we do there is with their permission. So it is vital that we maintain a good working relationship. Changes in staff at the Department typically require us to re-build the understanding and trust necessary so that we can continue our work. The past year has seen the resignation of Area Manager Keith Gell, a temporary replacement and, just within the past few weeks, the appointment of Scott Antcliff to the permanent position. These changes tend to act as a brake on progress and require extra effort by your committee to continue to make the case for appropriate support from the Department.

On a more positive note, last December Vonny Sprey was appointed as permanent, part-time ranger for the Island. She will work full time on the Island from December to April and then one week in four from May to August. We have agreed to employ Vonny as a weed contractor from September to November. While falling short of the year-round manning we continue to push for, we are delighted to have Vonny back on the Island.

In the past twelve months we have signed off on a new Community Agreement with the Department. This document sets out the responsibilities and contributions of DOC and MRS. It includes requirements for the management of health and safety for MRS volunteers and provides insurance cover while on the Island. We have also been granted a new lease on the nursery area. The lease includes permission for the installation of two new cabins which will be reserved for sleeping accommodation for our volunteers.

In another welcome initiative from the Department, Motuora has been selected as one of their key sites for the propagation and planting of the Nationally Critical kakabeak. Kakabeak, with its beautiful red flowers, has previously been grown on the Island though plants tend to be short-lived and are prone to being eaten by snails. The presence of kakabeak will help to raise our profile within the Department and may help to justify extra resources.

Our relationships with iwi who have connections with Motuora remain cordial. As settlement processes evolve we anticipate greater involvement with the Island and look forward to the days of cultural as well as ecological restoration.

Managing the Island

We have made satisfactory progress on managing and restoring the Island's biodiversity over the past year. Visits have been made for weeding, nursery work, planting, species monitoring and infrastructure maintenance.

The return of Vonny Sprey as Ranger has provided a welcome boost to most of these tasks with the campsite and the rest of the Island showing obvious signs of her hard work and dedication to the Island.

A lot of work goes into the never-ending task of weed control. Thanks are due to Helen Lindsay who manages our weeding programme, to Richard and George who do our abseiling, to Eliane our occasional contractor and to Vonny who has made a huge contribution. None of this could happen without the continuing support of the various funding bodies and we acknowledge current funders Foundation North.

This year we planted out over 100 coastal mahoe which had been propagated on the mainland by Shelly Heiss-Dunlop and brought bare-rooted to the Island where they were potted up until ready for planting. Another few hundred trees remaining in the stand out area of the nursery were also planted. There are still modest numbers of many species to be added to our planting programme and, if we can organise sufficient manning, we hope to start raising new plants in the nursery. This will include pingao and spinifex to be used for dune protection planting at Home Bay where there has been some recent erosion.

The seabird season

Our introduced population of Pycroft's petrels have had a wonderfully successful year. Thirty-seven individuals were recorded over the past breeding season, up from 17 the previous year. Thirteen of the nest boxes were occupied (6 last year) and five of the pairs laid an egg. All five hatched and four chicks fledged with the fifth found on the surface where it had possibly been predated by a ruru. It is likely that most of the 13 pairs found this year will attempt to breed next season. Thirty percent of the first cohort of 70 chicks moved in March 2013 have now been recorded back on the Island – a figure beyond our expectations. Another welcome surprise this year was the discovery of two unbanded adult birds. We had assumed that Motuora was too far off the normal range of the species to hope to attract them to the colony. Presumably these two birds accompanied some of our own returners and hopefully they will return and breed in future seasons.

This was the fourth year that fluttering shearwaters were attracted to breed by our sound system and the provision of nest boxes. The first two years had two pairs, the third had

four pairs raise a chick to fledging. This year we had three pairs and all three succeeding in raising a chick.

Diving petrels may still be breeding in small numbers down the cliff near to the release site but detecting their presence is difficult and there were no confirmed nesters this year. It is possible the birds are discouraged by the heavy clay soil at the release site where they may be unable to dig a nest burrow. We have decided to try moving the sound attraction system and nest boxes to what we hope will be a better site high on the cliff edge to the north of Still Bay. The soil at the new site is light and friable.

Last year our gannet colony had four pairs produce a chick and it is likely that three of these fledged. This season we again had four pairs, though only three laid eggs and probably only one chick fledged. We are checking progress at other Gulf colonies and considering our options for this project.

This was our first season when regular checks were made on little penguins breeding in the nest boxes installed along the shore at Home Bay. Seven of the 20 boxes were occupied and one by a pair of kiwi. Two other pairs used petrel boxes near the gannet colony. All of the pairs laid two eggs and 17 of these hatched eventually producing 15 fledglings. Penguin success in the Gulf colonies seems to be quite variable, possibly due to inconsistent food supply, but this was a good year on Motuora.

Once again, we had an enthusiastic team of volunteers who carried out regular monitoring during the seabird season and we hope they will be able to continue their good work.

Northern New Zealand dotterel

This year we had a maximum of five pairs of dotterel on Home Bay, though none on Still Bay. Only four appeared to nest. Two pre-Christmas nests failed at egg stage while one pair hatched a chick which did not survive. A pair at the north end of Home Bay raised a chick while Vonny protected the nest of a second pair using sand bags and later a wire cage and they successfully raised two chicks.

Lizards

Su Sinclair made a trip to check on the progress of our translocated Pacific geckos. She found 22 individuals, 11 adults, 2 sub-adults and 9 neonates. It was good that all age classes were recorded and to have proof that the adults are breeding successfully. Su reports that, given the potential available habitat, finding 22 individuals indicates that the population is likely doing well.

Other activities

Other notable achievements and events this year include:

- installation of two further water tanks after relocation to the new site half way up the hill. All four tanks are now connected and in use.
- three newsletters were published, our website was regularly updated and news was distributed by e-mails
- we have reviewed our health and safety planning and implementation and have had an incident-free year
- a stainless steel boarding ladder has been purchased and provided to Kawau water taxis. This makes getting on and off the boat less arduous.
- the Island continues to be used as a kiwi crèche and is supporting a healthy population which regularly provides birds to other sites. This year 22 birds were taken off, 10 to Pataua and 12 to Pukenui. The collection team reported that they encountered many more birds which were microchipped and released on the Island. Rolf Fuchs reports that his experience from seven years visiting the Island is that kiwi numbers are definitely rising rapidly even with birds being removed.
- our wetapunga seem to be doing well with increasing numbers of sightings. Chris Green of DOC is monitoring the population and we will report his findings when they are available.
- a very generous donation has been received from the Heseltine Trust who have helped us many times over the years.

A brief look ahead

The major task ahead of us is to organise the funding, purchase, delivery and installation of two new cabins which will provide accommodation for four of our volunteers.

We hope to raise kakabeak, spinifex and pingao plants in the nursery. The kakabeak plantings will be closely monitored and researchers from local universities may help with this once plants are established.

Sponsors and donors

Simon Chamberlin
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Heseltine Trust
David and Genevieve Becroft Foundation

We thank Kawau Cruises for subsidised cost of water taxis and for their reliable and helpful service to and from the Island.

Conclusion

Maintaining and driving forward a project such as ours requires a great deal of organising and work and I would like to finish by recognising the input from the Department, from your committee, from our contractors, funders, members and volunteers. Everyone plays a part in what we continue to achieve. I hope that you all feel happy with what has been done so far and that you will support our future efforts to restore the Island.