



Chairperson's Report for 2020-2021

May 2021

The preparation of each annual report requires a look back over the previous 12 months combing through newsletters, emails, minutes from our committee and from our quarterly meetings with DOC, and records from the Island, and combining that information with my, not always reliable, recollections. I usually begin with the impression that not much happened and finish by struggling to fit everything into a few pages of text.

Once again, the year was disrupted by the impacts of Covid-19 and a hot, dry period which put enormous stress on our resident kiwi population. The Island was closed for an extended period which delayed progress on installation of decking and solar power.

The dry conditions were extremely tough for our kiwi which were obviously in some distress as it was difficult for them to feed. Ranger Vonny wasn't able to cut the grass during lockdown and the extra growth at the campsite and around the buildings proved attractive to the kiwi as it was a little wetter there than on the rest of the Island. Vonny put in an enormous effort to provide food and water and this is sure to have saved the lives of some kiwi. Some birds were taken off the Island and released into protected sites in Northland.

When we were able to resume work on the Island we were keen to get contractor Ian Higgins back to complete work on the decking between the cabins. Unfortunately, Ian was unable to resume this task but we were fortunate to be able to employ Craig Garrett to take it on. Craig completed the deck, adding a 'boot box' and weatherproof compartment for the solar power controller and batteries. He also built a roof over the deck to provide a dry entrance area. Craig will return soon for some additional building work around the cabins and a new camp kitchen on the potting shed deck.

As soon as the weatherproof compartment was available, Kevin Hawkins was able to complete the installation of the solar powered lights and USB chargers in the cabins and in the potting shed. Who knew this would require quite so much effort? Certainly not yours truly, his fairly-willing apprentice!

So, the cabins story continues, long after we had anticipated. Perhaps next year's report will include the words 'finally completed'?

Our relationship with the Department of Conservation

I'm pleased to report a year in which our main contacts with the Department staff remained unchanged. Kat Lane is now 'permanent' in the role of Area Manager and Vonny Sprey remains our Island Ranger.

Vonny is still on a contract which sees her on the Island from December to April, then one week in four until the end of August. We then employ her as a contract weeder from September to November. Of course, we would prefer that the ranger be present all year and without MRS needing to fund the weeding contract and we continue to make our case to the Department for this outcome.

We know, from past experience, how important it is, for biosecurity and general security, that there be continuous presence on the Island. To help with this we had planned to recruit volunteers to stay on the Island during Vonny's absences. In planning this with DOC it became obvious that they would prefer that the volunteers worked under DOC protocols, especially for health and safety, and because most of the infrastructure belongs to DOC. This was simply achieved by DOC taking over the training and familiarisation procedures they deemed necessary. We had enough volunteers available and feedback from them was very positive. The process will be repeated this year.

In recent times we have had some difficulties with vehicles on the Island. I reported last year that our quad bike had reached the end of its life and, since then, one mini-tractor has also been retired and the other was removed after an accident. Our blue Ford tractor had also continued to need regular and expensive maintenance. There was much discussion about what was needed on the Island. The outcome is that we now have a ride-on mower, an LUV (light utility vehicle) and the blue tractor has just been returned after a trip to the mainland for an overhaul. Our thanks to the Department who funded all these changes.

In another infrastructure change we have donated to DOC those parts of the Island's solar power system which still belonged to the Society. DOC will continue to maintain the system.

I'd like to thank Kat and her team for their continuing commitment to Motuora and our Society.

Managing the Island's restoration

Although there were some interruptions to our visits over the year, much of the work planned was able to take place. Visits were made for weeding, nursery work, species monitoring, infrastructure maintenance and for the cabins.

Vonny and Helen Lindsay continue to plan and execute our weed monitoring and control with help from contractor Richard Sharp and his colleagues for rope access to the cliffs. Over the past year Vonny has managed to revisit most of the designated weeding surveillance areas and her report indicates that our efforts to eradicate or control some weeds have not been as successful as we would like. Of course, we are aware that new weeds will always arrive and that some have very long-lived seed banks. It is also the case that regular slips around the cliffs open up fresh soil which is quickly invaded by new weed plants which then provide new seed sources. Weeding is a major part of our annual expenditure and it is now appropriate to have a review of our strategy.

We have not yet managed to restart seed sowing in the nursery but hope that it will be soon. We have some pingao seeds ready to go.

Apart from the work on the cabins we also had to replace the wooden tank stand for the water tank near the potting shed.

Seabird monitoring

Our little penguins had another reasonable breeding season. We monitor pairs using our 21 penguin nest boxes and a few which use shearwater boxes near the gannet site. Eight nests produced 12 chicks and there were three second clutches with another five chicks.

The dotterels had a disappointing season with only one or two chicks from quite a few nesting attempts. This was despite lots of effort to protect the nests from high tides, marauding black-backed gulls and pukeko, and disturbance from visitors. It was good to have a sighting of a chick from 2019 which was given a leg flag with the letters CHW. It turned up at Wenderholm in September 2020.

Only four or five gannets attended the colony site this season and only one pair laid an egg. The egg hatched and the chick grew to near full size. Unfortunately, for reasons unknown, it died a few weeks from fledging.

We had four fluttering shearwater pairs using the nest boxes. Four chicks were fledged although one of them had some lesions on its face and may not survive.

We found no diving petrels nesting this year. It is possible that, at the original colony site where the birds were introduced, the heavy clay soil is too hard for the diving petrels to

dig their burrows. With that in mind we have moved the sound system to a new location high on the cliff top just north of Still Bay where the soil is light and friable. We will put extra effort into monitoring the new site in the coming season.

The Pycroft's petrels had another great year. Thirty-six individuals were identified at the colony and 15 eggs were produced from 15 or possibly 16 pairs. All the eggs hatched and the chicks fledged.

Our thanks are due to the volunteers who undertake the seabird monitoring each year.

Lizards

Thirty-one shore skinks were caught during a monitoring programme in 2021, most of which are thought to be Island-born (16 adults, 7 gravid females, 7 sub-adults and 1 neonate). This number exceeds the 24 individuals released in 2011 and confirms the important milestone that the population is at Translocation Stage 3 – *‘population growth as indicated by the capture of more animals than were originally released’*.

Average weights of adults and gravid females were 4.4g and 5.0g respectively and all were in good condition. The area occupied has expanded to the north and south of the original release site and further inland than has previously been recorded. The shore skinks continue to exist alongside copper and moko skinks.

Twenty-four copper skinks and eight moko skinks were caught (or observed) and all were in good condition.

Raukawa geckos were present in reasonable numbers at the release site, and an individual was detected at Macrocarpa Bay indicating that they are dispersing.

Pacific geckos are showing promising signs of establishment including multiple adults, island-born juveniles and sub-adults, and individuals were found north of the release site during spotlighting.

Other activities

Other notable activities during the year included:

- three newsletters were published and other news distributed by e-mail
- our health and safety plans and programme were updated and we have had another incident-free year
- we have suffered on-going issues with our website and membership database which have only been intermittently available. Work continues to resolve the problems
- two of our three sound attraction systems required major upgrades including two new amplifiers and two new loudspeakers

- visits were made to identify potential sites for planting out kakabeak. Six sites were identified and, after consideration to avoid disturbing archeological sites, three were agreed to be useable
- we have been successful in an application to the Chisholm Whitney Charitable Trust who will provide funding for our boat transport costs for the coming year.

Sponsors and donors

Simon Chamberlin
Foundation North
Auckland Council

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

Conclusion

The work described here is a bit like the tip of the iceberg as so much effort is required in the background to make it all happen. Thanks are due to your committee, to the staff at DOC, to our funders, contractors, members and volunteers. Our members and volunteers get their reward when they visit and enjoy the Island and see what has been achieved over many years of effort. I hope that everyone else who has contributed also feels their input has helped to get us this far and that all of you will continue that support and take pleasure from what has been accomplished.

John Stewart
Chairperson.