



Chairperson's Report for 2023-2024

April 2024

The past year has been one of consolidation and steady progress and, we intend, is preparation for a new step forward in the restoration project.

Our most significant effort over the year has been to get back on top of the weeds which had prospered over the Covid-period when we were unable to pay them sufficient attention. Helen Lindsay has planned and organised grid searching and weed control over the whole restoration area which is just in the final stages. She has had great help from Island ranger Al Fleming, from volunteers and from our contractor Richard Sharp and his colleagues. This has been a time consuming and expensive exercise but has been very worthwhile as we have determined that the majority of blocks are still mostly weed free, and we have managed to contain incursions to a few "hotspots". We have mapped and controlled the most important weed sites and can continue to monitor them.

We are very keen to have more volunteer weeders who are able to visit the Island for at least a few days at a time to help monitor these weed sites. It would be great to have several weed teams each allocated an area on the Island. Please contact me or Helen Lindsay if you would like to help with this important effort.

We have continued to run workdays on the last Saturday of each month and, while there have been a few missed due to bad weather, there has been a good turnout. The nursery work has particularly benefited, and we already have hundreds of kohekohe and kowhai potted up in the shade houses. We have been less successful with spinifex but will keep trying as we are keen to use them to help establish more native dune habitat at Home Bay instead of kikuyu grass. Vigorous tides with strong winds continue to erode the dunes so plantings will have to be established far above the high tide and we must be very mindful of the shore skinks present while managing this area.

In my last report I acknowledged a generous bequest from the estate of Sheila Coombs and noted the passing of Simon Chamberlin. Simon has also made a bequest and together the two will secure our financial future for many years to come.

Our relationship with the Department of Conservation

Our thanks go to Kat Lane, ranger Al Fleming and the other members of the DOC team for their guidance and support over the past year. The presence of a full-time ranger on the Island has greatly enhanced the work that the Society can undertake. We cannot expect the Island's plants and animals to prosper or pest species to be excluded without the protection afforded by the ranger's presence.

We were able to hold our quarterly meetings with DOC with some of us attending the Warkworth office in person, while others joined online. Much of the discussion at meetings centres on sharing our respective plans for work on the Island.

We are obviously concerned about the potential impact of recently announced cutbacks in the Department's funding. It remains to be seen if and how there will be impacts for the restoration project.

Managing the Island's restoration

It's good to report that our work over the past 30-odd years is certainly bearing fruit. The original pioneer plantings have, for the most part, succeeded with closed canopy over much of the planted areas. New land slips or tree falls are quickly colonised by new seedlings even if some of them are weeds! Our single invertebrate translocation, wētāpunga, seem to be doing very well as are all the reptiles. Our only forest bird translocation, whitehead/pōpokatea are now present in large numbers and work on the long road to seabird establishment continues.

Restarting the nursery has enabled us to raise seedlings of succession species – those which will eventually overshadow the pioneers and become the heart of the bush on the Island.

Weeds remain an on-going chore as already noted in my introduction.

Our current restoration plan was published in 2007 and it is now time to review progress and update the plan. Towards this end we have begun with reptiles, seeking expert opinion and consulting with iwi and DOC on candidates for transfer to Motuora. Depending on the outcome, our next translocation may be one of the geckos.

The next group to be addressed will be the birds.

Seabird monitoring

Perhaps the most significant event of the year was the total loss of the first clutches of little penguins in late October. Twelve of the nest boxes along the shore at Home Bay had breeding pairs. Twenty-three eggs were laid, 15 or 16 hatched and all the chicks had died between late September and 22nd October. Sadly, this pattern occurred at other monitoring sites around the Hauraki Gulf including Tiritiri Matangi. It seems likely that the parents could not find enough food to keep both themselves and the chicks alive. We had assumed that would be the end of the nesting season, but two pairs tried again, and both succeeded in fledging a chick.

Fluttering shearwaters fledged two chicks and one pair of gannets stayed for much of the season but didn't lay an egg.

The dotterels had another poor season with perhaps only one chick fledging from multiple nesting attempts by three or four pairs.

Our Pycroft's petrels had another good year as they progress towards establishment. We had records of more birds than ever before with 49 individuals, our previous best was 39. The total included 20 pairs which laid an egg and two pairs which didn't lay. Five other birds were recorded as not part of a pair. Amazingly, we had one first record of a bird from the 2013 translocation – it was found in a box later occupied by a breeding pair so was probably ousted by the owners. It's interesting to speculate if it has visited many times over the years but never been caught or was it somewhere else? We also had a first return from one of our Island-born chicks which fledged in April 2021. One unbanded bird was caught and banded.

Unusually, four of the eggs failed during incubation giving us 16 chicks. One of these disappeared at an early stage and the other 15 are still going strong and will likely all have fledged by the date of our AGM on the 23rd April.

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

Lizards

Regular lizard monitoring is continuing, and it appears that our translocated populations of skinks and geckos are doing well. This year has been the tenth anniversary of the experimental translocation of 90 Duvaucel's geckos to the Island. A comprehensive survey was carried out over recent months and, although we await the detailed analysis, it was obvious that they are now well-established and widespread across the southern half of the Island.

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. We had one accident this year when a volunteer fell on a slippery path near the ranger's house.
- a review and re-writing of our constitution. New legislation for incorporated societies requires our Society to change its constitution, some management processes and record keeping and to re-register with the authorities. Once we have agreed on a new version it is likely we will bring it to an Extraordinary General Meeting for approval by our members. With that approval in place, we can submit the document for approval and apply for re-registration. We have until April 2026 to complete this work.

Sponsors and donors

A bequest from the estate of Simon Chamberlin
Auckland Council Regional Environment and Natural Heritage Grant Programme

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

Conclusion

My report has described some of the major events of the past year, but there is so much more activity that has not been documented here. 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 and what has still to be done.

John Stewart
Chairperson.