Tāwharanui Open Sanctuary Society Inc

Newsletter 94 Summer 2025

Season's Greetings

In this issue

Mark the date

February 1
Sunday in the Park
work day. All welcome.

March 1
Sunday in the Park
work day. All welcome.

Support TOSSI

To volunteer, join and/or make a donation, go to https://www.tossi.org.nz/

From the Chair

Another year done and almost dusted. On Sunday 7 December we held the TOSSI Christmas lunch after our usual Sunday in the Park work morning. It was very hot for everyone but with good food and company it was an enjoyable occasion. Santa showed up but behaved badly, kissing everyone and stopping traffic to wish people a Merry Christmas. Everyone else behaved very well. The gannet raffle was won by Grant Connell, who will be happy to have one of the decoy gannets in his garden.

Also at the Christmas lunch we said thank you and farewell to Matt Maitland who is leaving Council employment at the end of January. He leaves a very large gap to fill and we don't know who that will be just yet.

Last week I attended the funeral of Gilbert Barruel who was on the TOSSI committee between 2016 and 2018. Tāwharanui was mentioned several times at his funeral because he spent time in the Park with his family. He also taught some TOSSI members to speak French. I'm sure his passing will come as a shock to many.

A very pleasant dinner for volunteers was hosted by Park Rangers Larissa and Ash recently, in appreciation of the work that volunteers do. It was great to see some of the trappers and fence checkers mixing with the nursery team, takahe monitors and the Thursday maintenance group.

I wish you all a very pleasant summer. I hope you will come out to the Park and forget about volunteering for a while — the work will still be there later — just enjoy the bush, the birdsong, the beach. Bring friends and family, and soak up this special place that we are contributing to.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

Sally Richardson

Tāwharanui Open Sanctuary is a joint project with Auckland Council

Auckland Council
Te Kaunihera o Tāmaki Makaurau

Open Sanctuary Senior Ranger Update

Tēnā koutou TOSSI members and supporters.

Thank you, again, for another fantastic year of support for Tāwharanui Open Sanctuary. A year in review is always a hard thing to capture, but here are some key observations and highlights for me.

Starting the year with a developing takahē chick was very exciting. We watched her grow and colour-up, and she's not looking very different from her parents, Heaphy and Rochfort. It has been delightful to keep Tāwhara on site and she is destined for wild release to the Wakatipu area sometime next year. Both pairs of takahē have been nesting again and we eagerly await new chicks.

The Nursery team again grew an impressive crop of plants for our public planting days. Branching out into wetland species in anticipation of the significant wetland development, the Nursery crew had a steep but successful learning curve on a range of new species. They look fantastic in the ground between the 'Vol Hole' and workshop. The TOSSI-led public plantings were supplemented by the Ngahere Project plantings in South Punchbowl as part of Auckland Council's commitment to retiring and revegetating an additional 200ha of farmland as native forest to offset Council's carbon impact.

We undertook a significant rabbit reduction programme with over twenty tonnes of toxic carrot fed out over the winter months, with all baits caged against takahē browse. We achieved a 70% reduction and this is being followed by ongoing shooting and burrow fumigation programme.

Tīeke, which had been impacted by our stoat incursion, have responded to the removal of stoats. Although we still have at least one stoat at large, the tīeke population has grown nearly 50% in the past year and is growing at a rate not seen since shortly after their initial introduction.

Tāwharanui has very much become a reliable place to go kiwi spotting. Our population is bulging and spreading beyond the fence. It was a delight to share our success with Tamahunga Trappers and provide a further 20 kiwi to boost the population on Mt Tamahunga.

Another obvious conservation success is that of wētāpunga. A night survey saw adult wētāpunga out and about, including a pair mating. One female had a very dirty ovipositor, indicating that the previous night she had been down on the ground laying eggs in the soil. Lots of other cool creatures of the night were seen — reflective flatworms, leaf-veined slugs, many spiders, and lots of tokoriro (more commonly called cave wētā, but not really wētā at all).

The red billed gull colony at Anchor Bay is recovering, with over three hundred pairs present. A few birds were found dead and some behaving in distress with obvious neurological impacts. This had us responding cautiously in case of possible Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI). A reminder that three or more dead or dying birds in one location should be reported to MPI. Do not handle them, MPI and our team will do so with necessary precautions. Testing of the dead birds showed negative for HPAI or Newcastle's disease and later pathology showed cause of death was a *coccidia* bacterial infection.

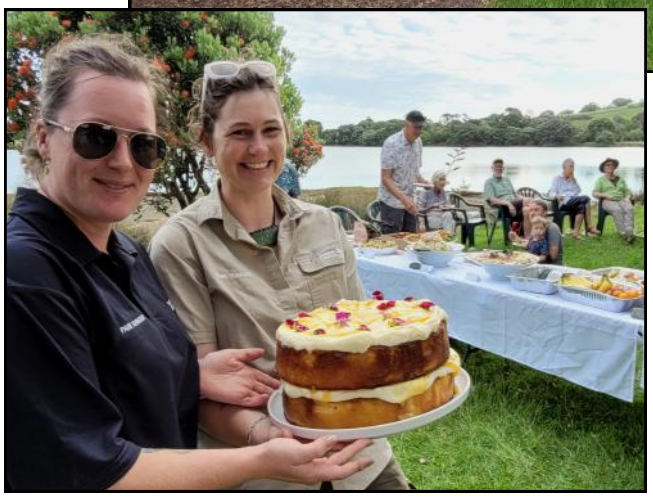
This is my last column for the TOSSI newsletter.
Nineteen years have passed since I first took on the role managing the Open Sanctuary portfolio for the then Auckland Regional Council. That role has come to an end for me. The partnership with TOSSI and Ngāti Manuhiri and the success of the Open Sanctuary has been an absolute career highlight. The opportunity to restore an ecosystem in partnership with community and return many taonga extinct on mainland Auckland or Aotearoa/New Zealand has been incredibly rewarding. Thank you for the opportunity to be part of this.

Season's Greetings and Happy New Year.

Matt Maitland
Senior Ranger
Open Sanctuaries

Matt with current Chair, Sally Richardson and past Chair, Alison Stanes.

Volunteers Appreciation Dinner

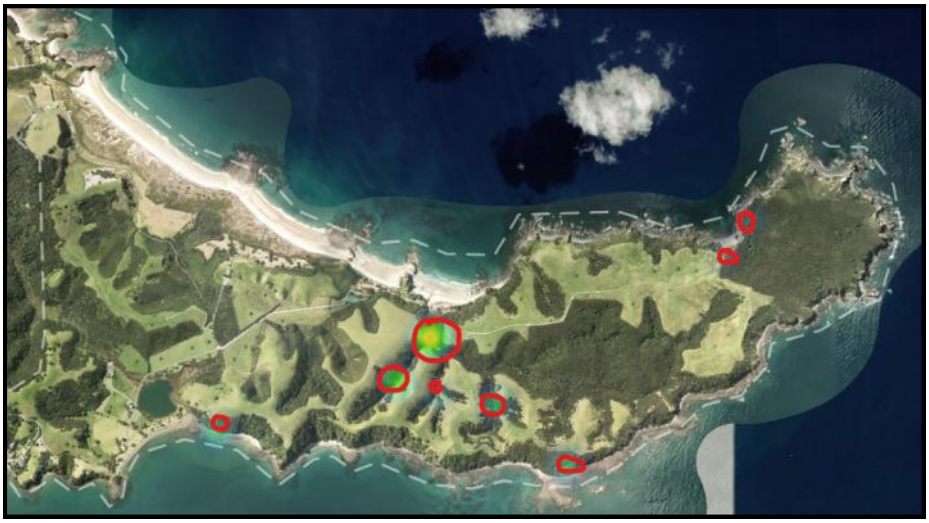


This event was hosted by Rangers Ash (left) and Larissa, with Council funding, to say thank you to TOSSI volunteers for all their mahi.
It was a very pleasant occasion with delicious food enjoyed by about 50 people. The venue, beside the Lagoon, proved to be an excellent space to gather in.
A mixture of volunteers with varied roles attended.

Predator Update

We have seen no rat activity within the Sanctuary on cameras over the last couple of months and only one spotted on the outside. However, we had two old kills in a couple of our response traps. The predator fence is doing a great job in keeping the bulk of a mixture of Norway and Ship rats out.

Unfortunately we're still seeing a stoat on wildlife cameras in the areas shown below. The stoat dog and handler have been through twice in the last two months. We have found minimal scat and it is believed we have knocked the stoat numbers down to one. This is a significant reduction within the last two years. When I first started in this role, there were at least ten individuals. This positive outcome is due to the ongoing pest control network we have established.
Every volunteer, contractor and staff member has contributed to achieving this excellent result.



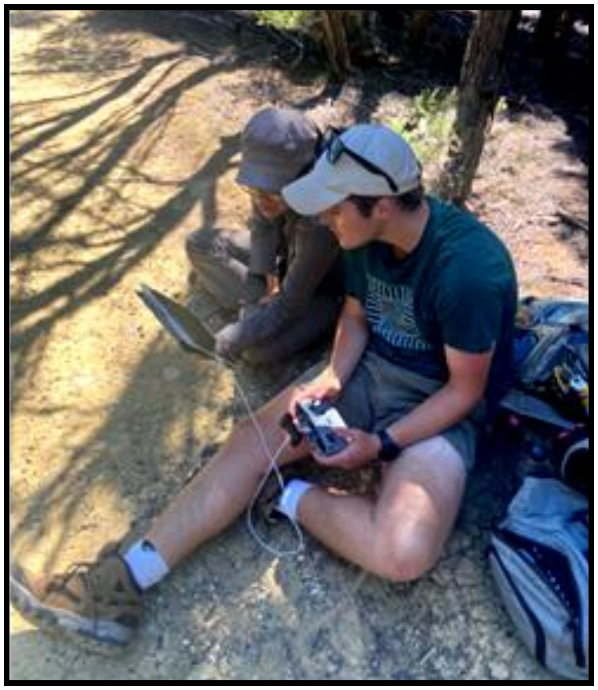
Ash Clarke-Walker
Ranger

Research in the Park

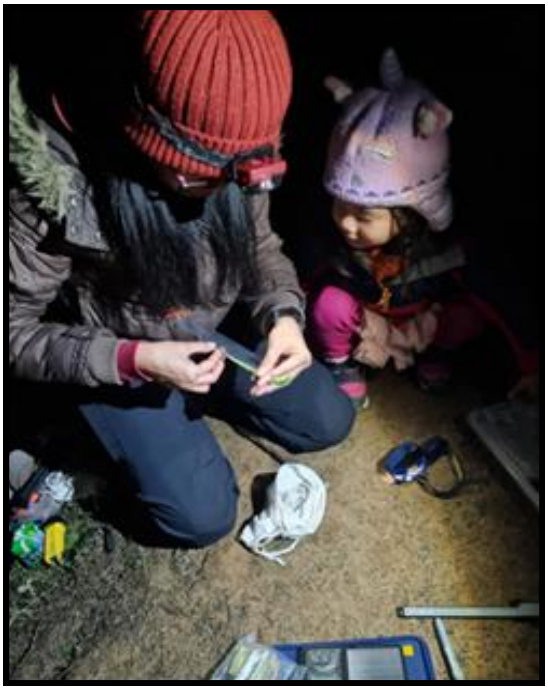
Unitec staff Marleen Baling and Campbell James, and students Dayna Thia, Jayden Bradley and Marcel Kerrigan, conducted surveys for geckos during the 2024/25 season at Tāwharanui Regional Park to trial a new approach using a small drone versus night-spotting to survey for geckos. This approach was successfully conducted in the South Island on alpine geckos and skinks by the University of Otago.
This survey approach is very promising, especially when drones can access hard-to-reach places (e.g. high tree canopies, coastal cliffs) where our native lizards tend to be. So we decided to try it out in Auckland in collaboration with Chris Wedding (Bioresearches) and Carey Knox (University of Otago).
An undergraduate Bachelor of Applied Science student, Dayna Thia, conducted the study as part of her third-year research project from April to September 2024. Marleen and her team then continued the survey once a month for 2–3 nights at a time from December 2024 to April 2025.

In that period they flew drones during the day and spotlighted for geckos at night. Unfortunately no geckos were detected (only stick insects!) using the drone during the day. The team checked the sites for bird activity prior to launching the drone to ensure the least disturbance to those in the area. The team also monitored the responses of any birds during drone flights, finding reactions, e.g. flying at a distance around drones or eliciting alarm calls were from black-backed gulls (*Larus marinus*), welcome swallows (*Hirundo neoxena*), and grey warblers (*Gerygone igata*). Most of the bird responses were brief, except for the black-backed gulls, when we would land the drone immediately. There were no apparent responses from tūī (*Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae*) and korimako/bellbirds (*Anthornis melanura*). These observations of bird responses were documented to increase our records and understanding of the effect of using drones for ecological surveys. Night-spotting yielded more success, with the detection of elegant geckos (*Naultinus elegans*) and forest geckos (*Moko pirirakau granulatus*) in the area. Both species are in good numbers and so are many invertebrates.

Marleen will discuss the next steps for this drone study with researchers at the University of Otago and determine if there are alternative protocols for the drones that can be added/modified to increase the detection of lizards. So watch this space!

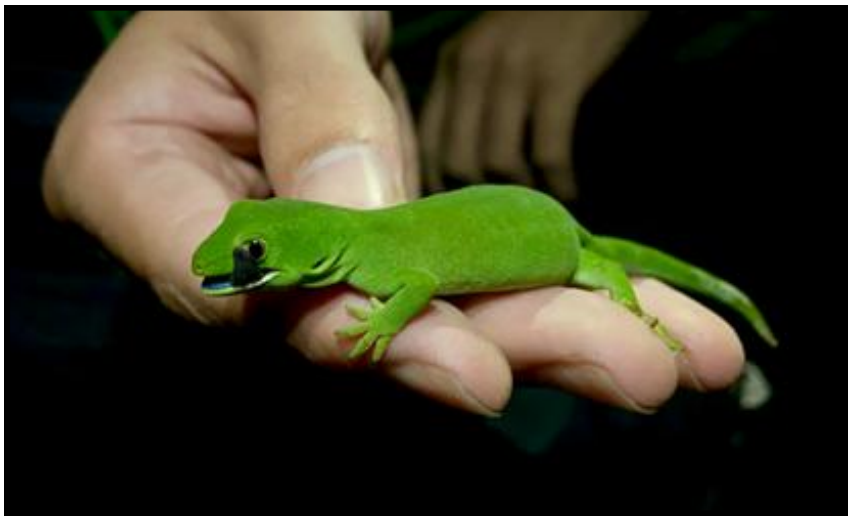


Above, Marleen and Campbell using the live feed on the monitor to spot geckos while the drone was flying over the tree tops.

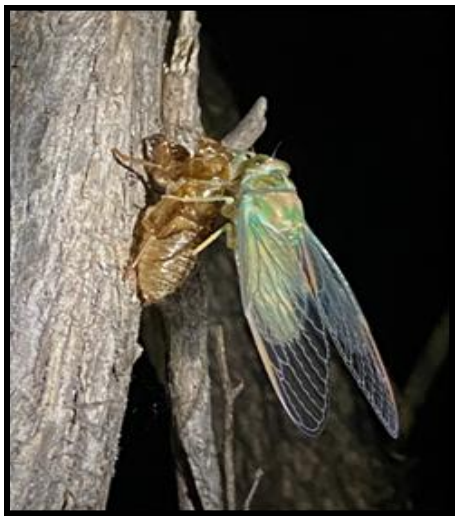


Above, Marleen measuring the length of the tail of an elegant gecko while her daughter watches on.

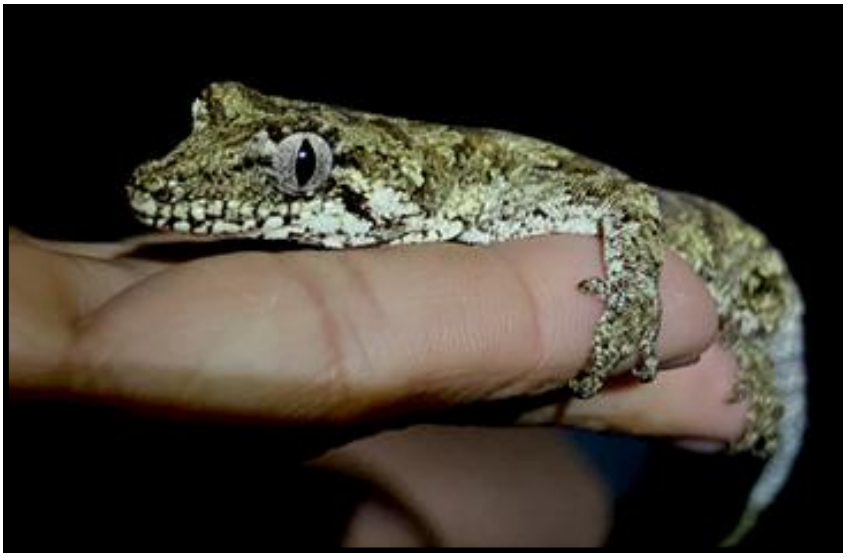
Creatures of the night



Moko kākāriki/elegant gecko cleaning its eyes, showing its blue inner mouth and tongue.



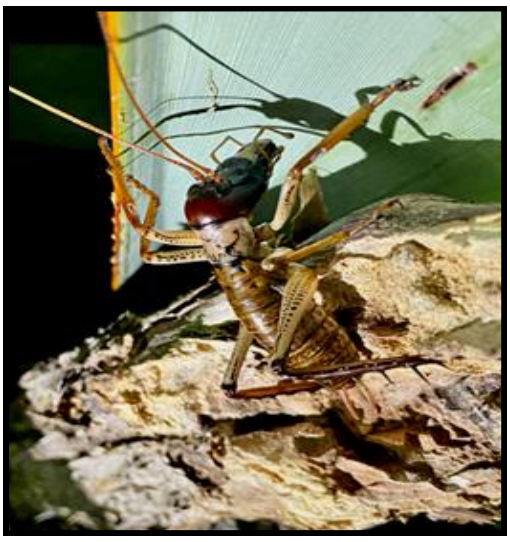
A cicada emerging from its shell.



Moko pirirākau/forest gecko with its beautiful tree bark and lichen-like patterns.

A pūriri moth.

Native praying mantis were seen multiple times at different locations during the night surveys.



Tree wētā were abundant in the survey area.

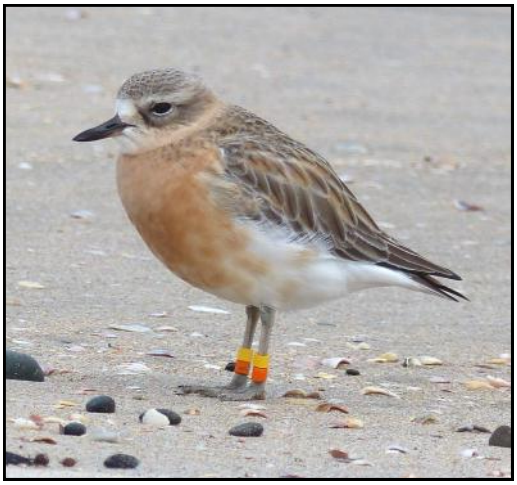
Tūturiwhatu (NZ dotterel) report 2025-26 season

Last year Tūturiwhatu at Tāwharanui fledged 12 chicks from 44 eggs, a huge improvement on three previous seasons of two chicks from between 60 and 70 eggs. Tūturiwhatu could well have a good season as five chicks have fledged already, with five more on the Park and six eggs, possibly more, in nests. Who knows why there is such an improvement in fledging numbers, although as citizen scientists we are seeing fewer black-backed gulls patrolling up and down over Ocean Beach sand face and fewer harrier hawks hovering over the dunes. It is interesting that for this season the total number of nesting pairs has dropped from 14 to eight and yet the fledged chick numbers are remaining stable. Re-nesting is practically nil this season although this is more difficult to prove when birds have no identifying colour bands.

Tūturiwhatu are known to live up to 22 years and more. Of the 14 birds with colour bands attached 15 years ago for a research project, led by John Dowding only two remain at Tāwharanui. The bands are not easy to read. As a result, it is more difficult to keep an accurate observation of pair numbers and loss of adult details. It also means monitors are not able to get to know individual birds' characters and personalities.

The two remaining tūturiwhatu with colour bands:
OW-BO (right) was banded on 17.10.06, has lost a colour band and is now OW-B. He had a difficult territory at Blue Bell Point on the South Coast. Over the first 12 years OW-BO and his partner fledged 15 chicks. Since the 2017-18 season no chicks have been fledged from many nest attempts with nest losses mainly due to storm surges. Two years ago he lost his partner and last year did not return. The monitors thought that was the end but surprisingly this season OW-B has turned up alone, first on Ocean Beach and then at Blue Bell Point. In the meantime access to Blue Bell Point has become increasingly more difficult. Aging volunteer monitors are less inclined to go there and so aging OW-B is left to reminisce quietly on his old territory alone.

YO-YO (right) was banded 18.12.13. YO-YO's territory is near Comet Rock on Ocean Beach. She and her partner have an excellent determined working relationship. In the first six years they fledged ten chicks. One of those nest sites was halfway up the dune face in a rabbit's short, unused, attempt at a burrow. For 30 days we watched nervously, as YO-YO sat peeping out from her shaded prime real estate site with splendid sea views, concerned the whole bank and nest might cave in. And it did the day after the eggs hatched! Not being able to return to the nest with the chicks over the first few nights, YO-YO was subsequently seen on the beach with the chicks huddled under her. It's been five tough years with eleven nests made, thirty-three eggs laid and no chick fledged. Last season two chicks fledged from their first nest and this season most likely one chick will fledge from the first nest.



Last season and this season at Tāwharanui tūturiwhatu fledgling numbers from first nest attempts are improving, a welcome relief for birds and monitors after those tough years. A big thank you goes to passionate volunteers Sharon Kast, Jan Velvin and Cheri Crosby who give many hours of their time monitoring and providing observations and nesting information.

Alison Stanes

Photos: Alison Stanes

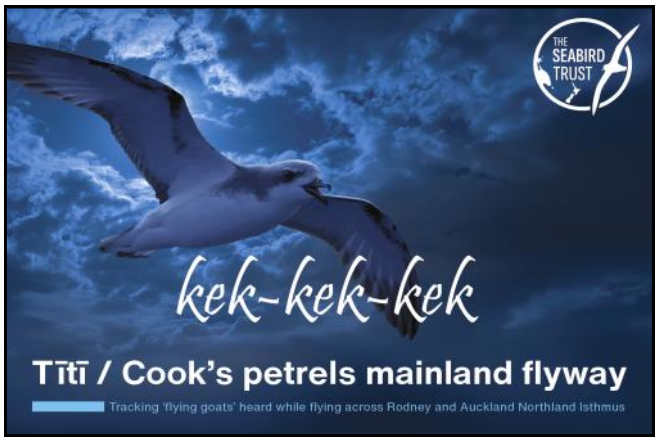
Tītī/Cook's Petrels

In December 2019 we discovered that Tāwharanui was home to a breeding pair of tītī/Cook's petrel.

This was remarkable as it was (and still is) the only known natural burrow of this species on the mainland.

This pair has bred at Tāwharanui every year since and has successfully raised four chicks. They're back again this season and we hope that soon some of their family and friends will join them.

The vast majority of the world's population of tītī breed on Hauturu Little Barrier (98%) with small populations on Aotea Great Barrier Island and Whenua Hou. They get their food from the ocean, many of them feeding in the Tasman Sea. With bellies full, they take a shortcut across the Auckland-Northland isthmus back to their nesting burrows. Tītī breed from October to April with the peak of calling by birds flying overland from October to January each year. Their calls have been likened to a 'flying goat' so if you hear strange sounds overhead at night it might be tītī.

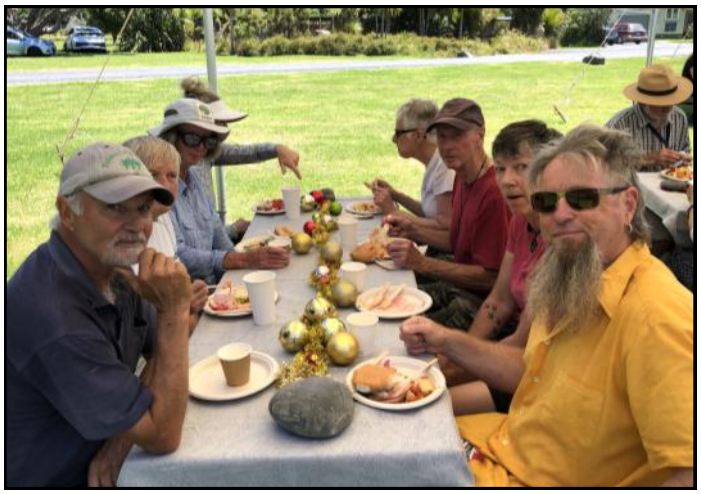


The Seabird Trust is running a citizen-science project to map this amazing overland flyway, and your report could make a real difference.

Find out more and report what you hear:
https://www.nzseabirdtrust.com/our-species-projects

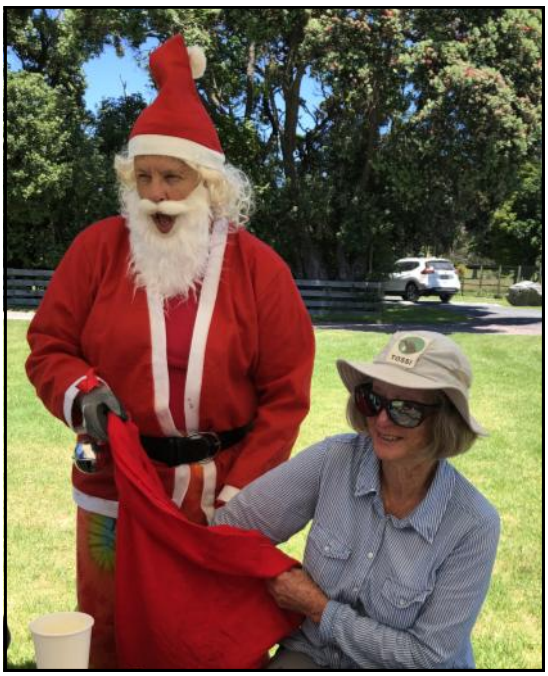
James Ross

Christmas in the Park

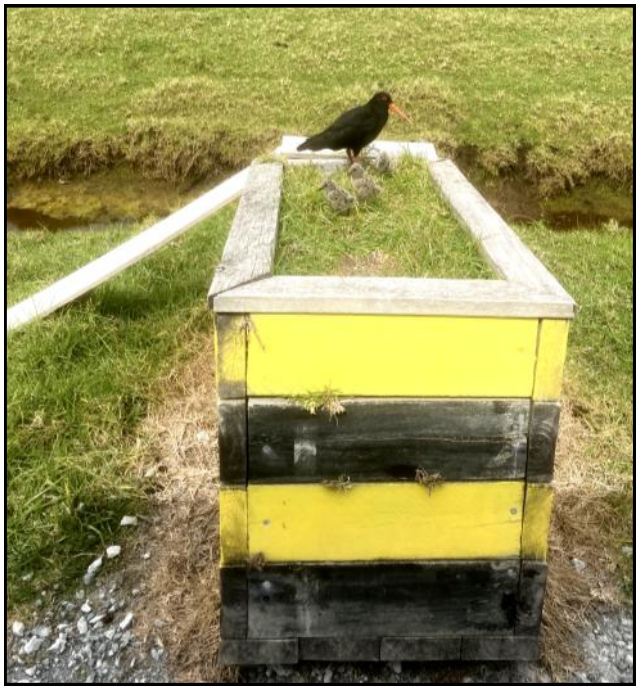


The TOSSI catering team — from left, Mel, Sally, Anne, Glenda and Maggie — provided a splendid feast for members who attended the Christmas lunch.

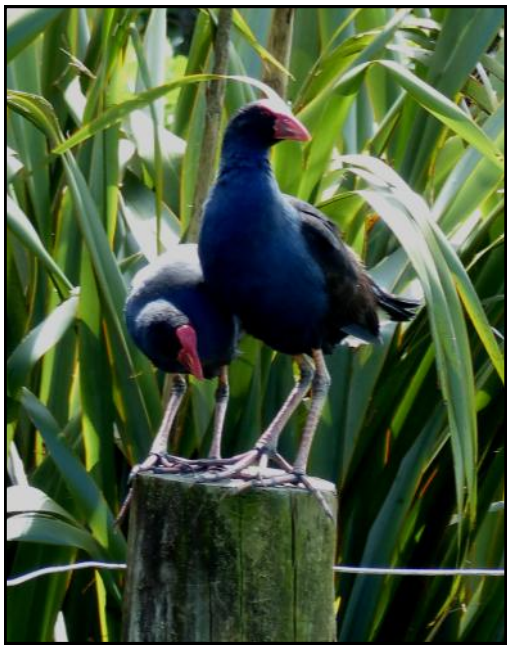
Santa had to put himself on his own 'Naughty List'!



Odds and Ends



Above left, two ruru/morepork seen on a wildlife camera at the base of a old pūriri. Above, this oyster-catcher has for several years made a nest and hatched its chicks in this planter box beside the road to Anchor Bay. Three little grey speckled chicks are at the parent's feet. A ramp was attached for the birds to more easily access their nest.
Left, California quails feeding in pohuehue (Muehlenbeckia) in the dunes.
Below, moho pererū/banded rail parents with their chicks, seen on a wildlife camera.



Left, amazingly, these two pūkeko managed to get on top of a post together!

Photos: Alison Stanes and Mark Atkinson