



Branch news

Summer

by Mike Britton, Chair, Wellington Branch

This is an exciting time for those of us who love nature. It is great when we can get out into our favourite local or more distant natural areas and enjoy seeing the first new chicks fledging and starting to spread their wings.

At Zealandia where I am working, we already have kākā, kākāriki and hihi chicks, and the hope of a young takahē as well. And the weasel that managed to drop in was caught within a week, thanks to a great effort by staff, volunteers and the sanctuary's many partners. F&B's Places for Penguins project is seeing little kororā chicks as well, and the branch is starting to gear up its campaign to defeat Darwin's Barberry.

Nature is always fascinating and there are always stories to tell and share. That is why, after a lapse over the last couple of years, the branch is looking to re-introduce talks and events to give branch members the chance to catch up with the latest issues and key things happening in the natural world, the environment and the battle to protect what is precious to us. Marc Slade, a former branch chair, has taken on the task to organise these and the first of the talks will be in February next year. Chirpings will keep you informed of dates, venues and topics.

We know there are heaps of things on, but we hope that these events will be a chance for branch members to get together and talk about issues of interest to them and to our community.



Spring brings a flush of new fronds on mamaku

Local news

The Wellington branch of Birds NZ has been active recently. In addition to their monthly meetings at which speakers give presentations on matters birdy, from any region of the globe, there was a pelagic (open sea) trip on 1 September. 18 or so keen birders ventured out into Cook Strait on a chartered vessel that usually offers fishing trips. A few species were sighted



White capped mollymawk

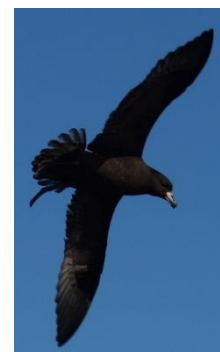
as the boat motored out towards Wellington heads, including a couple of giant petrels, birds more commonly seen further out to sea. Once out in the deep-water zone of 'the trench', ocean-going birds were attracted with a supply of fish scraps. Three species of great albatross were seen, and three types of mollymawk, the latter being smaller members of the same clan, with wingspans of a measly 2.5metres. Five other species of petrel were seen, as well as the



Northern giant petrel

usual harbour seabirds, and several fairy prions, birds only seen from the beach when they are storm wrecked. It was a difficult morning at sea. A southerly swell made for a choppy and uncomfortable trip. Several peoples' breakfasts, if not entirely dislodged, were given a severe shake-up.

Birds NZ has also just commenced a long-term survey of Wellington Harbour birds. The survey will replicate 4 similar surveys carried out every 10-12 years since 1975 and covers the entire coastline from Pencarrow round to Owhiro Bay divided into 17 zones. Volunteers walk their assigned section recording all the birds they see. Repeating the survey in this way gives an idea of how populations change over time and indicate long term trends.



Westland petrel

South coast clean up



RNZ interview

On Saturday 15th September the South Coast clean up took place at a dozen locations between Owhiro and Breaker bays. Clean up operations were organised at each location by a group interested in conservation ranging from the enthusiastic kids of Houghton Bay school right up to government agency NIWA. At each location rocks, beaches and bushes were scoured, improbable things hauled out from unlikely places and collected in a pile to show the amount of booty seized. A particular effort was made to collect cigarette butts, which it has been recently shown are the single commonest item of rubbish to enter the marine environment. They can be

thrown in the sea, blow from bins and streets or be washed down storm water drains in wet weather to end up in the same place. Te Raikaihau Point sadly took the 'Buttiest Bay' award with 835 cigarette ends. Yuk.

Beach clean-ups are a great event to take the family on. It's educational, active and everyone can get involved with hands-on conservation. If rubbish is lodged in places that are too small or dangerous for adults, kids are the perfect answer. Joking.



Small person; big rubbish



Some of the rubbish at Lyall Bay

At the Island Bay rubbish collection station run by the Friends of Tapu te Ranga marine reserve, Alison Ballance of RNZ interviewed Sarah from 'Mountains to Sea' about the morning's work, and the rubbish which included a concrete mixer drum. Meanwhile at Dorrie Leslie Park on the western side of Lyall Bay kids were having fun displaying the amount of rubbish they'd pulled from the environment. At lunchtime everyone headed to Lyall Bay where a sausage sizzle was provided to all participants. Masses of rubbish was removed from the coastline and beaches will be safer for people and wildlife this summer.

What exactly is a weed?

By Ken New

A weed is said to be a plant in the wrong place. In a garden, the gardener decides what's in the right or wrong place, but who decides in public areas such as Wellington's reserves and forests — and how? Can a plant be rightly considered a weed by some and not by others?

Here, we will focus principally on weeds that can smother and displace native plants and ecosystems in vulnerable natural areas. The Weedbusters website has a useful page describing many of the terms used when discussing different sorts of weeds:

<https://www.weedbusters.org.nz/weed-information/what-are-weeds/weedy-words>.

In conservation and restoration work, we tend to classify any exotic plant as a weed — but what about New Zealand natives that are not native to the area in question? For example, in Wellington there are many pōhutukawa, karaka and karo, none of which is originally native to the area. Pōhutukawa can hybridise with northern rātā, while karaka outcompetes local natives and establishes a monoculture.

And how do we regard some of the native vine species like pōhuehue (*Muehlenbeckia australis* or *M. complexa*)? These vines are important parts of the native ecosystem, but they can completely smother young plants in a regenerating forest. If, over years, you have carefully raised some



Muehlenbeckia australis (the slightly brighter green vegetation, delineated here by red outlines) spreading over regenerating forest in South Wellington

precious emergent species (future forest giants like tōtara and kahikatea) and planted them out, you probably won't want to see them killed by a thick cover of muehlenbeckia.

Do we consider that some exotic species are acceptable in the short term e.g. gorse? As a legume it fixes nitrogen in the soil and it also provides shelter for native seedlings, which will eventually grow through the gorse and kill it by out-shading it. This might be OK for forest restoration, but gorse remains a major pest plant in open areas, where each plant produces thousands of seeds that remain viable for 30–40 years.

In the 80s and 90s, tree lucerne was sometimes planted with natives in restoration projects. It grows quickly and is attractive to birds, especially kererū, as it flowers when there are few other food sources. Also leguminous, it too fixes nitrogen in the soil. From the Canary Islands, it is relatively short-lived (10–12 years) but, its prolific seeds are believed to be viable for up to 80 years.



Photo: Angus Napier

Darwin's barberry

Nonetheless, neither gorse nor tree lucerne feature in the Department of Conservation's "Dirty Dozen" of the most environmentally damaging weeds (<https://www.doc.govt.nz/Documents/conservation/threat-s-and-impacts/war-on-weeds-brochure.pdf>). Those that do appear in this list, such as old man's beard, buddleia and Darwin's barberry, pose a far greater threat to our forests — and in spring you don't have to venture far to see them flowering in city reserves.



Darwin's barberry in the canopy at Chartwell Bush, Spring 2011

So what are the key features that make a weed a serious environmental threat? While there are many other aspects, invasiveness must be a major consideration, e.g.:

- how quickly it grows in New Zealand
- how easily it spreads
- how adaptable it is to different amounts of light, climatic conditions, soils, etc
- how much damage it does to native species.

These may be the sorts of issue considered when compiling lists such as DoC's Dirty Dozen. New Zealand has about 25,000 species of exotic plants (and only about 2,500 species of native plants) and quite a number of those exotics are invasive to a greater or lesser degree — so the dirty dozen are just the tip of a huge iceberg.

What do you think? The Predator Free NZ initiative seems to have got a lot of Kiwis fired up about removing animal pests. Can we get people as excited about removing the most invasive species from their gardens? — even if those species are attractive and not widely thought to be weeds e.g. agapanthus and buddleia.

Let us know what you think. Is it feasible to eradicate some of our major pest plants from New Zealand or are they too well naturalised? Should we just look at reducing their impact in our most valuable natural areas?

Tapu te Ranga Island by Celia Wade-Brown

Tapu te Ranga island is the reason the suburb was named Island Bay. It has a fascinating history of human habitation and has seen vast changes in its ecology. It's actually two islands, separated by a channel just too wide to jump. It's a reserve within the Tapu te Ranga Marine Reserve, which was gazetted in July 2008, coming into force ten years ago.

There is significant Māori history. A number of settlement sites,



middens and ovens exist. In 1827 a daring escape from attacking Ngāti Mutunga saw Tamairangi and her family paddle a waka to Owhiro Bay where her beautiful waiata convinced Rangihaeata (Ngāti Toa) to spare her life. The reserve is now part of Ngāti Toa's treaty settlement, co-managed with Wellington City Council.

The Friends of Tapu te Ranga Marine Reserve installed the Snorkel Trail in 2011. The Marine Education Centre has been operating out of the Bait House and Surf Club since 2004, after beginning at Victoria University's marine laboratory in 1996. A dedicated band of volunteers educate people of all ages about our local marine biodiversity. Many divers enjoy exploring the sea around the island and it has certainly changed dramatically



Rat by a penguin nestbox



Looking back at mainland Island Bay

in the last ten years since the Marine Reserve was gazetted. In 2007, the world's first Marine Bioblitz took place. Over 550 species were identified, including some new ones including diatoms, a tube anemone, a flatworm, a bryozoan and a nudibranch.

Tapu te Ranga was once known as Rat Island. Early efforts in the 80s to eradicate rodents were carried out by local resident John Heatley, who would row out to service the bait station on each island.

By 2006 the rats were back in force. As Environment Portfolio leader, I and a colleague kayaked over and put out about a dozen bait stations. The ravenous rats ate the bait and even chewed the plastic bait stations. WCC has also installed several A24 self-loading traps too. After some years of eradication, we began to see more geckos and skinks, but from 2016, there was more evidence of rat infestation. In winter 2018, ten tracking tunnels were installed. A couple of weeks later, inked cards baited with peanut butter were installed and the next day they were checked. Oh joy – there were no little footmarks and all the peanut butter was still there, showing no rodents had visited. However, just a few days later there were quite a few prints – both rats and mice. Disappointing but the Tapu te Ranga Rat Busters team is not finished yet!

We think rat numbers have been very low at times, because bait has been untouched for considerable periods, so we assume that there have been reinvasions of rodents perhaps from boats, drifting on logs or just swimming across. Predator Free Island Bay will make a huge difference to the chances of making Tapu te Ranga the sanctuary it could become. If we can prove there are no rats, perhaps we could reintroduce tuatara!

In the surrounding sea there are penguins, seals, orca, dolphins and a right whale from time to time. There are many different fish, crustaceans and molluscs on the rocks and in the seaweed forests.

So what animals will there be on land once rats are gone?

There will be more lizards. The South Coast is home to several species of lizards. Both geckos and skinks have been seen on the island but are predated by rats. There are no cats on the island so we could see a big resurgence. There will be more oystercatchers and other birds whose eggs and chicks are vulnerable to rats. There will be more kororā, Little Penguins. Through Forest & Bird's project, Places for Penguins,



Common gecko on Tapu te Ranga

trained volunteers have placed nestboxes and Tapu te Ranga is a very successful breeding place. Monitoring these boxes is another good excuse to break out the kayak! It's important not to disturb the penguins as they pair up and have their fluffy chicks. It was a nasty surprise to see a dog sniffing at a trail camera placed outside a nestbox. Please don't bring your dog over to the island! It's one of the few places in Wellington where dogs are prohibited.



20 bags of rubbish collected

We have more to do to prevent rubbish washing up on the island. A few clean-ups with dinghies and kayaks have taken place over the years but the infamous north-westerlies mean the pebbly beach collects lots of bottles, plastic bags, lolly wrappers, plastic straws, tennis balls, plastic toys, even a political advertising hoarding, polystyrene fish boxes and lids. I'm excited about the new plastic bag ban but there's a lot more to do by individuals, businesses and Councils to keep our coasts and oceans clean.

Celia Wade-Brown QSO, Patron of the Friends of Tapu te Ranga, diver, kayaker, volunteer ratbuster, penguin monitor and former Mayor.

Wellybird – a personal view Pied stilt

Poaka or pied stilts are birds that can't really be confused with any other species around Wellington. There's only one location within the city limits where you have a reasonable chance of seeing pied stilts and that's at Makara where they are occasionally seen on the



estuary. In the wider region they are commonly seen at estuaries around the whole region and in the breeding season on Wairarapa rivers. Stilts are waders that spend their time around water and wetlands, although one shown here was checking out some dry grassland. Their smart black and white plumage, black beak, red eye, slender build and pink legs distinguish them from other waders. And they have longer legs than they are entitled to, which hang out beyond the bird's tail when in flight.

Being aquatic, their fine pointed bills are used to collect dainty morsels from the mud, weed and water. They usually pick and probe when foraging but sometimes they feed by sweeping the bill sideways through the water like a spoonbill. Their harsh repeated calls are a familiar sound around our estuaries and wetlands. There are currently pied stilt chicks at the Reserve at Pauatahanui which can be viewed from the 'Thorpe hide'.



Possible double bodied stilt

E-newsletter

Do you have any ideas for subject matter or things you'd be interested in hearing about in this newsletter? Please let us know by email to wellington.branch@forestandbird.org.nz. Any photos submitted must include photographer's credit and permission to be used.

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