



Branch news

by Mike Britton, Chair, Wellington Branch

I was recently told off for being pessimistic about the year ahead. It was politics in the US and Brazil that had coloured my outlook. It was pointed out to me that good things were happening like the number of women in the US House of Representatives and the numbers voting, all of which heralded positive change.

Forest & Bird as nature's advocate is going from strength to strength and making real progress, and our branch is doing its share. The start of **Wild Wednesday** evenings is a chance for members to get together and focus on nature in our city and beyond. As advertised in this edition the first will be on 'Capital Kiwis' at Forest & Bird on Wednesday 13 February. Another real positive is the Forest & Bird Youth, with an active chapter in the Wellington region.

For me personally seeing all the activity at Zealandia is uplifting. A takahē chick is a first and it's growing fast. All being well it will soon be able to be seen by visitors. Tuatara are active and visible; hard to remember that only a few years ago you could only see them on a very few offshore islands. And the 1000th hihi chick has just been banded. This all emphasizes that while Zealandia is a great place to visit, there is serious conservation going on, and it's all part of national recovery plans.

And, while not indigenous, the Zealandia prize for cuteness goes to a family of California quail! So, with summer sun and surrounded by nature, my message is 'let's be inspired to be agents of action and change'.



Hihi with leg bands

Local news

A bad summer for cuckoos

Pīpīwharauroa, shining cuckoos, are one of the few land birds that migrate to New Zealand for the summer. They arrive in September – October each year from their wintering grounds in the tropics. They are rarely seen due to their small size and cryptic plumage, but they are known to many by their call — a series of rising whistles finished by one or two descending notes, which can be heard for hundreds of metres, and also for flying into glass windows and doors.



This one committed fenestricide

Photo: Orde family

This summer there seem to be fewer shining cuckoos nationally and this has been noticeable in the Wellington region. Reports also suggest that shining cuckoos appear to have arrived later this year. This could be due to food shortages in their wintering areas, or possibly due to something that has disrupted their migration such as adverse weather. It will be interesting to see how long it takes for numbers to return to normal.

On 20 December, the 'Stuff' website reported that a koekoeā, long-tailed cuckoo, was killed in Strathmore when it also flew into a window after being harassed by tūi. Long-tailed cuckoos are extremely rare in Wellington and are normally birds of forest and scrub. It's common for songbirds to mob predators such as hawks, falcons and owls, but it's interesting that tūi had the instinct to do so, for this bird is no threat to them or their nests as it normally lays its eggs in the nests of pōpokotea, whitehead.

Spring was wet last year which allowed many plant species to do well early in the growth season. As a result, tī kōuka, cabbage trees, seem to have flowered particularly well this season, pōhutukawa flowers were spectacular in much of the region and flax in many areas produced huge flower spikes. Consequently, nectar was abundant, as in due course should be fruits and seeds.



Project Jonah

Over a weekend late last year, **Project Jonah** ran two courses on cetacean rescue. Project Jonah has pioneered whale and dolphin rescue since 1974 and has developed methods, equipment and techniques that have saved the lives of thousands of whales and dolphins around the New Zealand coast. Their techniques and equipment are so innovative and successful they have been adopted in many other parts of the world.

We've all seen heart wrenching scenes of dozens, even hundreds of dolphins or whales stranded, often pilot whales on the shores of Golden Bay. Over the years, the project has trained over 3,000 people as 'marine mammal medics'. The people who attended the recent training courses are likely to be called on to volunteer for the next stranding at Golden Bay or in the lower North Island. The recent Wellington courses added 40 extra people to their database.



Trainees learning rescue techniques using a 2 tonne water inflated pilot whale. Photo: Project Jonah

The training day comprised a morning in a classroom environment at the SPCA on Mount Victoria focussing on theory, which was run by Daren Grover and Louisa Hawkes, the organisation's only paid staff. It covered a lot of information, some of which was obvious, but other elements of which were not at all what you might think. This was neatly proved by asking candidates to write down their thoughts and impressions of a photo taken at a whale rescue both at the start and end of the session. We found we had learned sooo much in four hours!

The afternoon session was a mock rescue of a dolphin and a pilot whale. The Project Jonah team has inflatable models about life size which are filled with water and weigh in at about 200 kg and 2,000 kg respectively. At Scorching Bay, where the practical training was held, many members of the public came to ask what was going on, and a local news crew called in on the first day thinking the rescue was real.

Throughout the training, great emphasis was put on health & safety, and keeping volunteer medics in good condition was top



Practice rescue at Scorching Bay
Photo: Cameron Sang

priority. Some of the things to do or not do are not at all obvious, and we learned about lifting techniques, using a whale flotation pontoon, what parts of a whale to touch and what to avoid, and how best to cool the whale down to prevent heat exhaustion, their biggest problem while stranded.

You can find out more at www.projectjonah.org.nz or by emailing Louisa at louisahawkes@projectjonah.org.nz. Project Jonah is a charity and runs from donations. If unable to assist in person, you can help by making a regular or one-off donation.

Forest & Bird programme — Places for Penguins update

The team at Places for Penguins has been doing a great job providing nestboxes and monitoring them for occupancy and breeding success of kororā, Little Penguins, round much of the Wellington



Adults checking out the accommodation

coastline since the breeding season started last July. In April and May 2018, things were looking very promising with adult birds checking out the boxes and making nests in many of them.

But something seems to have happened after that. In Wellington, the breeding season normally starts in July, but last year few pairs began laying eggs at that time. The birds that had built nests disappeared and many were late coming to shore to breed. Some of the boxes with newly built nests were never occupied at all. It's possible that

food stocks were depleted, or that adult birds were unable to return to breed for some reason e.g. one of the pair was killed. As the season progressed more kororā did come ashore to nest and while results are not in yet, there seems to be a similar occupancy and success rate as recent years. Pairs usually lay two eggs, but one is not uncommon and three have been reported on a few occasions.

Once eggs hatch, the chicks emerge clad in short black velvety down. While they are in this state, a parent stays with them all the time to keep them warm, with the adults swapping guard duty every night or two. As the chicks grow bigger, they develop longer fluffy grey down which has better insulation properties. This along with their bigger size allows them to maintain their own body temperature, and the adults are able to leave the chicks unaccompanied during the day while they both go fishing to feed the hungry brood.



Chicks in grey down



A ruff and bonnet of down remains. The other chick is a bit shy.

Chicks stay in the nest for an average of 56 days and their parents return every night to feed them. As they grow from baby duckling size to almost a kilo in weight, they go from lying or squatting to standing tall in the nestbox. In the last couple of weeks of their time in the nest, adult plumage starts to push through. The new plumage is pristine and sometimes bluer than in adults. The chicks scratch and preen during this period either to get their new feathers in top condition, or maybe just because the feathering process is rather itchy.

This leads to a stage where the birds are about adult size and have a beautiful new set of feathers, except for the backs of the neck which they cannot reach with beak or claw, and so a patch of grey down often stays in place until the birds are finally ready to leave the nest. At this stage the parents have decided the kids can look after themselves and have gone back out to sea to feed themselves up ahead of their next challenge in a couple of months' time — moulting. The chicks are left to find out for themselves how to swim, fish, avoid danger and other skills needed to be a successful adult penguin. It's a tough childhood.

NEW SECTION

FOREST & BIRD WELLINGTON'S WILD WEDNESDAYS

The Wellington branch is going to be arranging several different events that will interest members. We'll be publicising them a month or two ahead. There will be a mix of subject matter and some great presenters who are experts in their field. Here are the details and dates for the first couple of events, so mark them in your diary and come along.

Capital Kiwi — Restoring Our National Icon to the Capital City

When: Wednesday 13th February 2019, 6.30pm to 9.00pm

At: Forest & Bird Office, Ground Floor, 205 Victoria Street, Wellington

Kiwi, the feisty flightless birds with the chop-stick bill, have been absent from Wellington for over a century, unable to survive habitat loss and the array of predators introduced by the people who're named after them.



Join us to hear Paul Stanley Ward (Founder and Project Lead for Capital Kiwi) talk about Capital Kiwi's exciting and ambitious plan to re-introduce kiwi to Wellington.

Wellington has become a front-running biodiversity hotspot and this project will help cement our place as New Zealand's Natural Capital.



Presented by Forest & Bird Youth Wellington and Plastic Oceans

Film: A Plastic Ocean - In support of Sea Week 2019

When he discovers the world's oceans brimming with plastic waste, a documentary filmmaker investigates the pollution's environmental impacts. Produced by the Plastic Oceans Foundation, this film uncovers the damage being wrought to the world's oceans by our use of plastic. Plastic pollution is also an issue in New Zealand's oceans and threatens our precious marine taonga.



Given the Government's recent moves to ban single-use plastic bags, what needs to happen next? Come and watch this movie about the state of our oceans and share your thoughts and ideas about how we can tackle this pressing issue.

When: Wednesday 06 March 2019, 6.30pm to 9.00pm

Where: Memorial Theatre, Kelburn Campus, Victoria University of Wellington

For more information about the Plastic Oceans Foundation <https://plasticoceans.org/about-film/>

Or to donate <https://plasticoceans.org/donate/>

For more information about [Forest & Bird Youth Wellington](https://www.forestandbird.org.nz/branches/wellington)

And on the Wellington branch <https://www.forestandbird.org.nz/branches/wellington>

Wellybird – a personal view

Red-billed gull

Summer is the time most people encounter tarāpunga, the red-billed gull. These beautiful birds are occasionally seen on inland lakes or farmland, but generally they are very much coastal gulls and are usually seen close to the shoreline. They often congregate at the same beaches and tourist haunts that people go to on their summer break. Strange that gulls should choose the same holiday spots as humans – a clue on this later.



The red bill and legs of adult birds stand out strongly against the pale plumage. In young birds the bill is darker

and the legs paler. Juveniles could be confused with black billed gulls, but the latter are rare in Wellington, and while there is a colony in the Wairarapa, they are more birds of inland lakes and rivers.

At rest red-billed gulls are dumpy headed and peaceful, often roosting in groups, sometimes alongside white-fronted terns, but they have a feisty side too. In territorial disputes they are noisy and aggressive towards others such as the one at left which was 'king of the castle' at White



Thinks... that looks like a chip packet

Rock on the Wairarapa coast. Disputes can be noisy affairs with lots of posturing and loud calls to intimidate any would-be interlopers.



Red-billed gulls are well known to beachgoers. They have developed a liking for hot chips, sandwiches, pies and other picnic favourites to the extent that they will steal our food wherever the chance exists. Sit on a beachside seat with a paper package and suddenly they become very attentive.

However, feeding them is not to be encouraged. Bold ones can terrorise small children with food. They develop a liking for foods which are not part of their natural diet and which may deprive them of the nutrients they should be getting from the marine organisms that they would eat without the intervention of fast food. Nationally, red-billed gull numbers are dwindling, and while they may seem common at popular beaches, they are classified variously as declining, vulnerable and threatened.



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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