

Whenuapai Air Base, and how a tractor spawned a wetland



On a Saturday in May a sizeable contingent of North Shore Forest & Bird members were the privileged guests of Terry Walker, Grounds Manager, at the airbase at Whenuapai. We were there to see the landscape developments being undertaken under his auspices. On today's base, large stretches of what was previously mown grass are now flourishing riparian plantings, increasingly attractive to wildlife. But the reason behind this development is much more prosaic than simply attracting birds.



On a wet day in July 2010, Grounds Manager Terry Walker was overseeing a dirty, and at times dangerous, activity - retrieving a tractor and mower that had become stuck in the sodden ground. The grounds of the airbase are crisscrossed with drainage channels; at that time many were concreted, and there was a requirement to mow to the edge of the channel. Unfortunately, this edge tended to be at the bottom of a steep slope.



This was not the first time a tractor had almost toppled over in the slippery conditions of the winter months, and Terry was concerned about the potential danger to his employees, not to mention the cost of the damage to the tractor and the environment.

Always looking for ways to improve, Terry realised that removing the concrete that formed the base and sides of the drains, and planting the sides with suitable native species, would both reduce the mowing area and improve drainage. The latter would become even more significant as the neighboring housing developments greatly increased the water runoff onto the base.

In 2012 Terry started a programme of weed removal, riparian planting and drainage channel improvements. The Squadron Leaders at the time, David Curry and Peter Reid, were very supportive, having also seen the need to remove the mowing hazard. Together with Terry they made a plan to begin planting the steep slopes alongside the creeks and drains and to remove all the weed species on the base. The latter was no small task - the weeds removed included wattle, pine, phoenix palm, privet, Japanese Honeysuckle, old poplar trees, and woolly nightshade.



It was felt that these changes would result in a more pleasant environment for the personnel and their families who live and work on the base. It was also hoped that the increased planting would also lead to an increase in wildlife. Therein lies the dichotomy of the site, which is an airfield - and out on the airfield birds are a problem. So, the aim was to produce an area to connect one end of the Base to another via the existing streams and wetlands, while encouraging our native birds to steer well clear of the runways.

Progress has been impressive. To date, approximately 60 linear meters of pipe and concrete has been removed, and at least 15km of riparian planting has been completed.



With the drainage redevelopments underway, Terry moved his focus to another waste area on the base where he could see the potential for large scale redevelopment. Called the Fuel Farm, it is a huge space of approximately 400 square meters adjacent to the Base Fuel Storage; low-lying, weedy, and unattractive, it was an ideal candidate for a wetland planting. Today, seven years after redevelopment began, the area attracts birds in numbers never before seen in the area. It has also had the side effect of encouraging people outside of the ground staff to get involved in the work.



Fuel Farm before redevelopment



Five years after planting



Today, showing next area to be developed.

An area of old pines has recently been redeveloped with the help of children from the local When-uapai School, the felling of the pines providing many yards of firewood for the base staff. In early July this year the schoolchildren planted 700 seedlings in this area; they had been growing these seedlings as a school project.

In total, over 600 square meters of wetland planting has been completed on the base to date, comprising over 5,000 plants.



The changes to the environment on the base have been substantial already, but Terry has further plans: "There are some wetland areas to complete and a small stream to plant at the gate end of base and then we might look at the stream at the far end of the Base at what we call Ponga Rd end. And then maybe the old bit of defence land along Kauri Road..."

The value to people, wildlife and the environment of the changes that Terry is overseeing on the base cannot be underestimated. Plantings of flax, kowhai and coprosma and other natives along now-natural streams are thriving, testament to good management practices and lots of hard work. In the light of the developments in the local area, with farmland increasingly being converted to housing, the need for these plantings has never been more urgent.