



Places for Penguins

a Forest & Bird Wellington Branch project



Forest & Bird

TE REO O TE TAIAO
Giving Nature a Voice

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An island resort for kororā *by Nigel Roberts*

Places for Penguins (PfP) has teams of volunteers monitoring little blue penguin / kororā nesting boxes in bays right around Wellington harbour. Nesting boxes have been placed on the seaward side of bays such as Balaena Bay and Shelly Bay in an attempt to provide safe, easy-to-reach havens for kororā to breed, raise their chicks, and moult.

Whereas PfP used to monitor its nesting box sites on a fortnightly basis at best, volunteers have been checking nesting boxes for the past two years on a weekly basis during the nine-month kororā breeding season (that is, from the beginning of June through until the end of February). During the short non-breeding season, nesting boxes are now monitored on a fortnightly basis (rather than once every four weeks as was previously the case).

Even when the weather is bad (and ardent Wellingtonians will occasionally concede that it's sometimes bad in the country's capital city), PfP volunteers are able to go out in pairs to see how 'their' penguins are faring. No matter whether there is a freezing southerly or a howling northerly, it's almost always possible for PfP volunteers to check the nesting boxes in their area.

There's one major exception to this, however.



Noel Pepperell heading over to Taputeranga – the island in Island Bay – on a clear, calm morning in April 2023.

One of the safest places for little penguins / kororā in Wellington is Taputeranga. It's the island that gives the suburb of Island Bay its name. Dogs, cats, and stoats can't get to the island, and neither can most people ... unless they have a boat.

As a result, Forest & Bird approached the Wellington Sea Kayak Network almost ten years ago to see if its members could help, and ever since then, about ten to twelve Wellington-based sea-kayakers have been a part of the PfP programme.

Unfortunately, though, Wellington's weather doesn't always play its part. While freezing southerlies and howling northerlies aren't a threat to the lives of PfP's landlubber volunteers, they can constitute a clear and present danger to the Taputeranga penguin nesting box monitors.

In the last seven months of last year (from the beginning of June through to the end of December 2023), Pfp kayakers were able to get across to Taputeranga on only 19 occasions. Sadly, that's a strike rate of less than 64 per cent. We had an Indian summer in June: Pfp's kayaking team were able to get over to the island on each of that month's four weekends. On the other hand, Wellington's equinoctial winds were especially bad last year and the Taputeranga team visited the island only once in October.



Annabel Nickol and Peter Fairless at the kayak landing site on Taputeranga during June 2023's "Indian summer."



Nigel Roberts took this photograph just as he was leaving Taputeranga and starting to paddle back to Island Bay beach on an overcast morning in January 2023. Nigel's sea-kayak is – most appropriately – a New Zealand-made model called a Penguin!

Despite (or maybe it's because of) the vicissitudes of the weather, it's always a thrill to be able to kayak from Island Bay beach across to Taputeranga and see how the inhabitants of the island are doing. There are 16 penguin nesting boxes on the island, and usually about half of them are occupied. Occasionally – very



A make-my-month moment: part of a large pod of dolphins swimming between Nigel Roberts' kayak and Taputeranga in January 2024.

occasionally – we are treated to an additional thrill and come across dolphins while paddling to and from the island. When that happens, it doesn't just make my day (to quote Clint Eastwood); it makes more than a month for me!

Although the 2023-24 breeding season seemed to get off to a slow start, I am happy to report that when two members of the Taputeranga team visited the island on 22 January they counted nine adult kororā and two chicks occupying nine of the 16 nesting boxes. I breathed a real sigh of relief when I saw those figures.



Two little penguin / kororā chicks, still predominantly covered in down, in a nesting box on Taputeranga in January 2024.

Nigel Roberts was a founding member of Pfp's kayaking contingent and currently coordinates the group (which at the moment consists of ten people). If you have a kayak and would like to be involved in the Taputeranga kororā monitoring programme, email Nigel at nigelsroberts@gmail.com

Bay update

Tarakena Bay West site has had a few trials and tribulations during the 2023-24 breeding season. Initially we thought three boxes were occupied but one pair moved to another box later in the season. The tagged pair that that occupied the same box as in the previous season bred successfully this season, raised two chicks and moulted.

However, the pair that moved boxes laid an egg much later in the season. The female laid two eggs

in 2022-23 and had trouble feeding them enough to fledge, so they were helped to get fat enough to complete their feathering. Once the pair were taken into care the female moved into the box to moult.

In 2023-24 it looked as though she found a different mate but he never returned to help with incubation. She remained incubating her one egg until she was probably starving, so left the egg just before it was due to hatch. Such a pity but it highlights how important it is for pairs to share the breeding activity.

Eco-sanctuary for Miramar north?

The Miramar Peninsula is a haven for kororā. Now students from Victoria University's School of Landscape Architecture are looking at ways to provide even more protection for the birds, particularly at the northern end, with a proposal for an eco-sanctuary and national heritage reserve.



Matai Moana/Mt Crawford is a 95 hectare area encompassing former Defence and Corrections land which has been earmarked as a potential reserve for more than a decade. For the last few months the Masters students have been working on a plan to transform the area, incorporating significant sites for Māori, military emplacements, the old Mt Crawford Prison and the Massey Memorial.

The process has been a bottom up one, where the students have first consulted with Mana Whenua, Predator Free Miramar volunteers, locals and Places for Penguins representatives. Informed by these discussions they have come up with proposals which could benefit kororā.

These include:

- Closing the road at night, which would lessen the chance of penguins being run over
- Clearer signage to warn dog owners of their responsibility to keep their dogs on a leash
- More planting to encourage penguins to nest in natural habitat.

Whether or not these ambitious plans come to immediate fruition, it has at least kickstarted debate and is sure to be a useful initiative in protecting this special area.

Dogs take kororā toll

Little blue penguins around Wellington are continuing to die. In April alone at least four kororā were likely killed by dogs.

Tragically, the pair which were killed by a dog at Evans Bay Marina were a breeding pair which had been microchipped and successfully raised two chicks last season. Places for Penguins committee member Shannon Ritter described the deaths as having a “devastating” effect on the Evans Bay colony.



It appears Evans Bay Marina may be a hot spot for dog attacks. Only a month prior to the pair being killed, another adult penguin succumbed to a mauling by a dog, and there has been at least one other death there in the last two years.

The other dog attacks occurred in Island Bay and Lyall Bay. Unfortunately, the deaths may be just the tip of the iceberg, since there were at least a further half a dozen over the last year which are suspected to be caused by dogs.

The attacks come as Wellington City Council has freed up off-leash areas for dogs in nine suburbs, and is under pressure to create better and more signage throughout the city.

Evans Bay fenced area for kororā

Now that a small area has been fenced off just north of NIWA HQ in Evans Bay, Places for Penguins has placed nest boxes in the hope kororā might be encouraged to settle in. A pipe has been built into the fenced off area so they can access the area from the bay.



Coastal reserves - have your say

For the first time since 2002 the Wellington City Council is rewriting its coastal reserves plan, so it's a big deal, especially for penguins. Submissions close on June 20, feedback forms are available at all libraries and WCC will be hosting a beachside chat at Oriental Bay June 8, 10am-12pm. Read all about it at **Coastal reserves - have your say**

<https://www.letstalk.wellington.govt.nz/coastal-reserve-management-plan>

Text and photos by members of the Pfp management team, except where otherwise credited.

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