



FRIENDS OF MANA ISLAND INCORPORATED

PO BOX 54 101, MANA

Newsletter Number 22

December 2004

Hi folks

How the year has flown. Christmas is upon us. Regrettably Summer is still to arrive. The equinoxials continue to hammer us from both directions which make many of our activities a lottery.

Having said that, we must congratulate the Parakeet Monitoring teams managed by Colin and led by Barry and Sue, on their persistence and observational powers. We had a great day last Sunday, should have been a great Saturday, and the team with Lyn from DoC, and some sponsors, all spent the day bird watching. Lyn says that we have identified 22 of the 26 Parakeets released in May. There do not appear to be any offspring as yet, but reading colour bands is an enormously difficult task as the birds seem to squat on their feet and cover them with feathers. The group of 18 scoured the valleys and managed to identify 10 birds, two of which had not been previously sighted. A great effort.

The other fantastic news last week was that a banded Fairy Prion had been identified nesting, and was confirmed as being one of the first group of 40 released in January 2000. In addition the bonus of unbanded Fairy Prion's would indicate that a combination of the sound system and banded birds returning is attracting other birds to nest on the Island.

Add to this what has the potential for a record year for the Takahē with six chicks identified and the Brown Teal showing off their chicks. What a year this could be.

The year is, of course, drawing to a close, so to all of you volunteers who make fantastic things happen on our Jewel of an Island, a big thank you from me and the Committee.

Have a happy Christmas and a fruitful New Year. I look forward to working with you next year on more exciting projects.

Brian

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES 2005

Fairy Prion and Kakariki monitoring

12/13 February

12/13 March

Places available for 7 people

Weed pulling and control

12 March

(Cancellation day 13 March)

Places available for 30 people

For more information, email: contactus@manaisland.org.nz

News from the Island

During Jason's sojourn in the Waikanae Area Office, Tony has been in charge and rumours are that all donations of chocolate fish will be gratefully received. Jason on the other hand has been getting a taste for life on the BIG island and socialising every night.

Grant has been carrying out some of the boat trips and he, Nio and Erica have been helping Tony with the season's weeding programme. They have systematically grid-searched the Island in order to remove any unwanted plants that pose a threat to the restoration of vegetation. In parts of Forest Valley and in steep coastal areas, this has had a positive spin-off; a small colony of diving petrels were discovered high up the on coastal cliffs just south of the trig. This could possibly be a colony that has established itself without assistance or it may be a remnant of the original colony. Either way it bodes well for the re-establishment of seabirds as it suggests that there could be similar small colonies in other locations on the coastal faces.

When the weather gods granted favourable conditions, a helicopter sprayed the sweet pea high up on the northern cliffs. The inaccessibility and extent of this invasive weed that smothers the coastal

shrubland, makes it tricky to tackle from the ground.

Mark and Geoff, from the Kapiti Area Office installed some new box culverts on the public tracks, however the weather turned nasty and they ended up working in the Nursery. Later, the Global Volunteers had to be taken off by helicopter due to inclement weather. Kelly Hare continued with her field work studying McGregor's skinks for her PhD project.

This was the worst planting season for many years. Several trips were cancelled due to poor weather conditions. The total number of trees and shrubs planted was 12,183, just under the target of 15,000 plants. On the good side however, the wet spring meant that the plants all got off to a good start. The streams and wetlands were full and these of course provide the ideal habitat for breeding waterfowl.

A large amount of seed, which was collected last summer has been sown in anticipation of the next planting season. The new seedlings will be pricked out soon.

The clutch of six brown teal chicks born in September has decreased and become a nuclear family of Mum, Dad and the two kids. A new pair of birds has been seen, consisting of one of the

original released birds and one of their Mana offspring. New generations are now adding to the gene pool.

There are over a dozen paradise ducklings on the wetland.

The takahe have paired up and some are nesting; Nio has been keeping a close watch over them using radio tracking equipment. While weeding, the skeleton of a takahe was discovered in House Valley. Investigations revealed her identity to be Vella who was last seen in January. A sad discovery, but it is good to get confirmation of her whereabouts. On a more positive note for the takahe programme, the first chick was born in October and the present total is four with the possibility of a couple more.

The kakariki are going well apart from one that was found dead in a nesting box.

Recently Colin Miskelly went over to check the diving petrel colony. During the dead of night, in fierce winds and on a cliff edge, he and Nio found 27 birds ashore incubating 15 eggs. A single unbanded fairy prion also arrived late that night and was caught and banded. This is a significant event as it could indicate that some Mana fledged fairy prions have returned undetected to the Island and are leading other birds here also.

FERNBIRD CENSUS CONTRACT SIGNED

FOMI has just signed a contract with Emilio D. Tobón García to undertake a census of the fernbird colony at the the Manawatu Estuary and to recommend how many, if any, of these birds could be transferred to Mana Island without compromising the population's long term sustainability.

Fernbird bones have been found on Mana Island. The North Island Fernbird is now extinct in the Wellington region (although there has be a recent unconfirmed report of one in a wetland near Waiakane) with the nearest viable population being at the Manawatu Estuary.

With the creation of the Waikoko wetland on Mana Island the opportunity now exists to re-establish this species on the Island, as recommended in *the Mana Island Ecological Restoration Plan*. The Wellington Branch of the Ornithological Society looked into initiating this project about five years ago but has not been able to make any headway.

Emilio is a PhD student in ornithology from Mexico City whose wife has just begun a lectureship at Massey University in Palmerston North. (By the way, he's desperate to find a source for Mexican flour so he can make authentic tortillas). Emilio's PhD dissertation is focused on the ecology and behaviour of the magnificent frigatebird, specifically the growth and development of chicks in relation to the availability of food. He also has a wealth of practical experience in the conservation of bird species and of natural areas. Thank you to Joan Leckie of the Friends of the Manawatu Estuary and Brent Barrett of the Manawatu Branch of Forest and Bird for finding Emilio for us.

Emilio has already talked to the experts and sourced the sound equipment he needs for this project. Once his recent basketball injury to his knee mends, he will be kayaking up the river to the fernbird site to begin his research.

ANOTHER COLONY OF DIVING PETRELS FOUND

Dr Colin Miskelly, (DoC Technical Support Manager for Conservator) writes -

I am delighted to report the first evidence that some of the 240 fairy prion chicks transferred to Mana Island between January 2002 and January 2004 have started to return. Based on studies at a prion colony near Dunedin, I was expecting the first birds to return during 2004, and was growing a bit concerned that nothing had shown up. However, on 21 September an adult fairy prion was caught at the site where the chicks were housed before they flew to sea. Much to my surprise, this first bird was unbanded. To put this in context, we have had a solar-powered sound system broadcasting calls of fairy prions every night at this site since April 1993, without any prions being detected. My hunch was that some of the banded prion chicks had returned, and had attracted this unbanded bird ashore.

A second unbanded bird was found in an artificial burrow during the day on 8 November. Then on 12 November I received a phone call reporting that one of the returned chicks (identifiable by the band on its leg) was in the same burrow, along with the bird I caught in September, and at least two other prions were flying over the site.

This first returned chick is a very important milestone for the project. As this was the first prion transfer attempted anywhere in the world, there was always a risk that the birds had developed a homing instinct for Stephens Island (the source location) at a young age, and that none would return to Mana Island. I am pleased to note that this first returnee spent only 3 days on Mana Island; this suggests that prions develop their homing instinct at a very late stage – perhaps on the very night that they fly to sea. On this evidence, I expect that a high percentage of the transferred chicks will return to Mana Island over the next 3 years.

I am confident that other transferred chicks have returned and will be among the birds seen flying over the colony at night. From the Dunedin study, we know that not all birds return in their third year, and some of the 2002 cohort are likely to turn up next year also. We only transferred 40 chicks in 2002 (compared to 100 in each of 2003 & 2004), and so anticipate larger numbers of birds will turn up during 2005 to 2007.

The first returned chick was found by DoC staff member Nio Mana, who will receive his prize on my next visit to the island!

Thank you again for the huge effort that FOMI have put into this project.

Identities - Allan Corry

Recently, Colin Ryder interviewed Allan Corry. Allan is one of those people who are the backbone of any voluntary organisation. Never likely to get a Conservation Award, never likely to be on a Committee but always there on the ground, where it really counts. Allan is Mana Island's seed collector par excellence. This is Allan's story.

"I am part of a volunteer group of helpers who collect seed for regeneration of Mana Island's bush lands and forest. How did it all start?

On a visit to Kapiti Island the ranger, Peter Daniels, sat us all down for a talk. The first question he asked was "How many of you are home-grown Kiwis?" Half the group proudly put up their hands.

He then asked us to identify the native trees around us.

The answers were revealing.

It was a shock. We couldn't identify our own New Zealand trees.

So I set about trying to learn the trees while tramping in the bush and mountains. After months of observing trees, leaves, bark, flowers, fruits and nuts, it was time to assist Mana's seed collection programme. Jason Christensen (DoC) provided a seasonal calendar of approximate seeding times, a list of seeds required for the island and a tree identification book for reference. I was given maps of local areas to collect from, so as to maintain similar genetic stock to that on the island.

I spent a lot of time the first year exploring the Porirua and Karehana Bay scenic reserves, attempting to find likely seed trees of different species. Every so often I would fluke the right tree at the right time and collect some seeds. I soon learnt the hard way that this was a hit and miss method. Observing flowering onwards to maturing seeds, so as to learn the seeding cycles of each species of tree, was a better way to get results.

The seeds of the high canopy of the forest eluded all my efforts, until a big storm brought down immature flowers, seeds and berries. These proved to be indicators of where and when seeds could be found at a later date.

A seed collecting year starts in late spring with the flowering and seeding of rangiora. The slowly maturing seeds of the red matipo might also be ready. It is essential to record ripe seeding periods in your calendar throughout the seasons for future reference.

The easy seeds to collect are those with hard shells – miro, matai, pigeonwood, hinau etc. They are very colourful when ripe, easily seen by both birds and collectors.

The hardest seeds to collect are those that remain green throughout their maturing with few clues to indicate ripeness. Henge hange and lancewoods change slightly with a touch of purple just before they fall to the ground and disappear into the leaf mulch. Giant kahikatea grow a small pink fruit attached to the seed before falling.

Each tree has its own way of dispersing its seed, or protecting seeds from browsers. Divaricating shrubs have densely interlaced twigs with small leaves; the seeds deep inside the bush are like miniature pearls.

Seeds dispersed by wind from high in the canopy are the most difficult to collect.

For example, half a dozen parachutes, shaped like little feather dusters, are released for wind dispersal from each of the seed capsules of the puketea. Rewarewa has to be watched closely to observe the first of the seed capsules splitting. Too soon and the seeds are not viable; too late, and the seeds have flown with the aid of a tiny wing. Then you must wait for another flowering year and six more months for the seed to develop.

Kohekohe trees seed every two years when they produce a bumper crop. Bucketfuls are collected to broadcast at random under the established tree canopies on Mana Island. Other seeds are being trialled to see if this method might work for them as well.

It cannot be assumed that all seeds will grow without further assistance. For example a miro seed may lie in the soil for years until there is a wet enough season to enable it to germinate. It then requires many wet seasons for its slow growth. The island's nursery, with its regular supply of water, speeds up the growth of many young trees. It is there that you can see the results of your collecting labours.

It's all the little discoveries to be made along the way, learning the many facets of forest ecology as you explore, that makes collecting interesting. Each collecting expedition reveals wonderful diversity of life forms. It's good to get to know a forest in all its seasons and to know that Mana Island will one day be the same."

THE ALMOST UNAUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHY OF JASON CHRISTENSEN – 10 YEARS ON MANA ISLAND

By Colin Ryder

A month or so ago I rang Mana Island to have a chat to our favourite Field Centre Manager (a fancy DOC terms which means “Ranger” but sounds more impressive). Unfortunately, I was told by a colleague, who would prefer to remain anonymous, that Jason was taking a senior colleague back to the mainland but the trip was taking longer than usual because of the need to take frequent stops. When pressed for the reason, it was explained that Jason and Ian had been celebrating Jason being on the Island for 10 years the night before. Enough said.

Ten years on Mana is a major milestone (or is it a millstone?) and it seemed to me that members may be interested in a short account of his time there. A little bit of blackmail and the rest, as they say, is history. The bargain was that most of this biography is factual, based on an interview, rather than fiction which would have been largely based on my fertile imagination but supplemented by scuttlebutt.

Jason has a background in horticulture and was working in a nursery in the Wairarapa at the time the position on Mana became available. Funnily enough, he heard about the Assistant Ranger’s job on Mana when he was on the Heaphy Track. Some six months later, the job was re-advertised and yet another two months later, young Jason got the job.

In the interim he had been invited over to the Island by the then Field Centre Manager, Phil Todd (of mouse eradication fame), to help with weeding. Jason now thinks it was a practical test to see if he could cut the mustard (or in this case, “pull the karo”). Obviously he could.

Jason remarked that he had his photo taken for the first time on Mana during his inaugural week on the job. He’s obviously developed a taste for it: I’ve even seen it on the internet. (At least, he hasn’t been in the NZ Women’s Weekly. Mind you, I was slim and hirsute then).

Jason had an early introduction to the vagaries of boating across the relatively narrow gap between the Island and the mainland. When Jason started his life on Mana he did not have his boatman’s licence. After Jason had been on the island for two months, Phil had to go off for several weeks. This left one very inexperienced, and probably justifiably nervous, Jason as the only boatman. Unfortunately, his first trip proved to be an unpleasant lesson when what looked like smooth sailing from the stability of the beach, quickly turned into a lumpy and somewhat scary sea.

The other chilling factor was his introduction to his house on Mana.

Jason’s first winter on the Island was a bit of an eye-opener. From the warm bosom of the family home, his house on Mana had no carpets, no curtains and was open plan. (I have found that personal insulation is very effective, Jason).

Jason’s favourite project was undoubtedly the restoration of the Waikoko wetland. It was his complete focus for six weeks. They all worked hard and played hard and every time he sits on his deck in the afternoon sun, sipping his coffee, he can watch the brown teal paddling in the water. And, it undoubtedly made a big imprint on the Island. Best of all, though, it involved lots of very HEAVY machinery. Jason says that there’s nothing like being woken up at 6am by a toot from a Mack truck. (He’s right, there).

In spite of his geographical isolation on the Island, Jason has enjoyed the social aspects of the job. He’s met some really interesting people and worked with some really good DoC colleagues and contractors, and developed a good network of contacts.

He’s at pains to acknowledge the massive contribution made by volunteers over almost 20 years. “The Island would not be what it is today, and many of the projects would not have happened without community involvement.”

Several other events stick in the memory, but for different reasons.

On one occasion, he had to dispose of a dead orca on the beach. This involved dismembering the memorably odoriferous carcass, burying the flesh and bagging up the bones; carrying them along the coast and over to the mainland on the boat. The smell lingered longer than he did.

Another time, a certain somebody organised sponsorship of 10 tonnes of cement from Winstones to reinforce the construction in the Wetland. Our poor lad had to move it all himself. (That’s 250 bags, folks, each of which would have had to be handled at least three times). And I thought he would have been pleased at my initiative.

Jason was also involved in a “Miami Vice” type police chase. One day while out in his boat, he noticed that someone had landed illegally on the north end of the Island. He beckoned to the individual concerned who came out in his dingy and, lo and behold, brandished a knife at our surprised lad and took off. Jason did the right thing: rang Ian Cooksley, his boss. Ian rang the Police and the volunteer rangers. The chase then got serious, in a “Keystone Copish” sort of a way with a

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DOC TO TRANSFER SPEARGRASS WEEVILS TO MANA ISLAND

The Wellington Speargrass Weevil is host specific on Speargrass (*Aciphylla squarrosa*) found on Wellington's South Coast. It is now regarded as being critically threatened (i.e. close to extinction) because of a population decline resulting from predation by rats and mice and habitat modification (goat browsing, fire and competition from rank grass and gorse).

For several years now, DOC scientists have been considering transferring some of these weevils to Matui/Somes Island to establish an insurance population in a safe haven. However, a recent inspection of Mana Island revealed more and better habitat. Accordingly, DOC will shortly be searching for these weevils. If they find enough, they will be transferred directly to Mana. If not, they will be taken to Mt Bruce for captive breeding to build up the numbers.

Denis Fairfax is proceeding with the oral history programme, taping the recollections of those associated with the various phases of Mana Island's history. Progress is slow but steady with three interviews completed and several more about to start. Tapes are to be deposited in the National Library and in Pataka. Any suggestions re suitable interviewees should be directed to Denis at dfairfax@paradise.net.nz

Check out our website.
It is regularly updated
with current news

www.manaisland.org.nz

***Of the 26 kakariki
released in March,
twenty-two have
been positively
identified by their
bandings!***

Who's Who

Brian Paget (President), Doreen Douglas (Vice President/Newsletter), Kelvin Hunt (Secretary), Jan Barnes (Treasurer), Colin Ryder (Publicity/Sponsorship), Vicky Froude, Dave Adams, Tama Coker (Iwi Representative), Jason Christensen (Member/Island Ranger), Ian Cooksley (DoC)

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convoy of police cars, carrying the Armed Offenders Squad, and even more cars carrying members of the public, pursuing this idiot up Whiteria Park.

Where to for the future?

In ten years, the planting programme would be effectively finished and the forest would be clearly visible from the mainland. The bush would be swarming with robins and kakariki and there would have been several other species re-introduced and breeding happily. (Ryder's concrete gannets still won't be flying, however.) Pigeons, tuis and bellbirds will be there doing their bit to develop a sustainable and healthy ecosystem.

While the planting would have dropped right off, FOMI will still have an important role in the Island's restoration.

FOMI has just started the background work in unearthing the human history of Mana. Jason sees FOMI's work in this area as instrumental in building

up the members' and general public's awareness of this fascinating aspect of the Island.

And, of course, he thinks that FOMI will become more involved in developing the visitors' facilities and interpretation on the Island as he anticipates it becoming more popular. But "it will never be as big as Kapiti." He sees Mana as Wellington's "hidden jewel."

Jason cheerfully admits to having a great lifestyle on the Island. He meets an endless stream of interesting people and is hardly ever forced to eat alone. Every day is different and there is a great deal of variety with things changing very quickly.

Most importantly, he has made a major contribution to conservation on the Island and, through that, for New Zealand as a whole. It's somewhat ironic, given his passion for the subject, that he will be regarded as an important part of Mana Island's history.

Thanks, mate!!
Colin Ryder