



Winter Newsletter 2026 Number 90

Kia ora tātou,

Some of the work undertaken over the past three months:

- Responded to a range of information and support requests from WBF members and public
- Organisation of the Peat Lake and Wetland Waananga, Forum day, Ōhaupō Hub and Lake Ruatuna, November 17th

Friends of Te Whanganui o Hei Marine Reserve - Whitebait Connection & Experience Marine Reserves – Coromandel/Hauraki

This season has seen Whitebait Connection (WBC) and Experience Marine Reserves (EMR) continue to grow across the Coromandel/Hauraki region, connecting tamariki with their local awa and moana through hands-on conservation education and real-world experiences. The Friends of Te Whanganui-o-Hei Marine Reserve Trust is the provider organisation for these programmes, with local area resident Shona Whittaker delivering the programmes to schools and learning communities throughout the region.

The programmes have reached a diverse range of learning communities this year, including mainstream Kura, EnviroSchools, homeschool groups and our local ECE Bush Kindy. Many schools and learning centres are located close to an awa, estuary or the coast, so there are fantastic opportunities to use the natural environment as a classroom. A highlight this season has been expanding Experience Marine Reserves (EMR) to our local homeschool communities. We brought together tamariki from across the Coromandel who shared a strong interest in marine science and conservation, giving them the opportunity to get out on the water and experience the marine reserve first-hand.

This also demonstrated the exciting potential to grow EMR further across the Coromandel. With high-protection marine areas and offshore islands within our wider region, we have an opportunity to work alongside local operators and conservation partners to give more Kura and community groups access to these special places and extend learning to beyond the classroom. Another highlight was a four-week Whitebait Connection programme with Riverlee ECE Bush Kindy. The programme was run over Matariki and incorporated stream studies, freshwater exploration, riparian planting and restoration on the bush kindy whenua.



For younger tamariki, the value of the programme isn't necessarily about leaving with a list of ecological facts. It is about establishing a relationship with the natural environment. Over the four weeks, it was exciting to see the tamariki become increasingly familiar with their awa, develop curiosity about what lived in it, and take an active role in planting and restoration. These experiences are an important part of what conservation education

can achieve. They give students the opportunity to experience their local environment, ask questions, build knowledge and, most importantly, develop a connection to the places they live.

This season has also strengthened our collaboration across the region, working alongside the Mercury Bay Environmental Trust, Waikato Regional Council's Biodiversity, Pest management and Marine team. Local tour operators, MPI Fisheries team and The Department of Conservation. These connections are helping to strengthen the wider conservation network and create opportunities for environmental education, reservation and future community initiatives.

For the Coromandel/Hauraki region, the direction is clear: more opportunities for tamariki to get outside, experience their awa and moana, and understand their role in caring for them. "It has been really rewarding to see the programmes grow across the Coromandel this year. What stands out most is the connection tamariki develop when they are given the opportunity to experience these places for themselves. Whether it's discovering an eel in their local stream, planting beside an awa, or getting out on the moana and exploring a marine reserve, those experiences create curiosity and a sense of belonging. That's where the foundations of kaitiakitanga can begin."

The Trust would like to acknowledge and thank Waikato Regional Council's Environmental Initiatives Fund for their two-year funding of these programmes. This support has enabled us to offer Whitebait Connection and Experience Marine Reserves at little or no cost to participating schools, helping remove barriers and making these experiences accessible to more tamariki across the region.

Student voice:

"I liked finding bugs in the awa. They tell us if our water is healthy for our land and our bodies. We need to keep them safe" – Kōa, Riverlee

"Planting trees is important mahi because it's not just for the birds and the bees, it's for our awa too!"- Katie, Colville

"I've always loved being in the Ocean but I didn't think there were so many cool jobs working in it! I didn't realise how much was happening beneath the surface and it's made me want to learn more about marine studies!" Jayden, Homeschool



Predator Free Hauraki Coromandel - TrapNZ Data haring

Thanks to the 26+ projects that are sharing their Trapnz data with PFHC. We ran possum catch data through AI analysis to see what conclusions it could draw. We deleted all the project data first (project name, trapper name etc). The data was over 6,000 records from over 1,200 traps of many different trap types. As we know, AI can make mistakes, so we need to check all its conclusions, but it can quickly perform mathematical analysis.

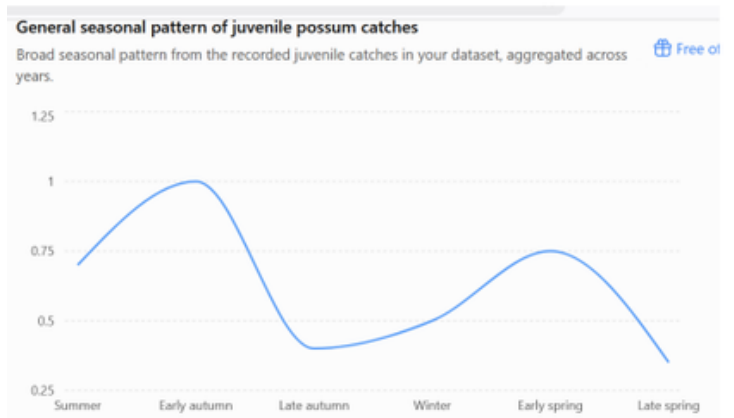
Because we usually haven't recorded install date or traps checked but found empty, we have assumed traps were installed on their first capture date and were removed/broken/lost if they didn't catch anything for a year. One clear pattern is that twice as many males are caught as females. That is consistent with what many possum-control programmes observe: male possums are often more likely to be captured, because males tend to have larger home ranges and higher movement rates, especially during the breeding season.

As time goes on, fewer males are caught. Our data shows exactly that directional shift, although the sample size is still fairly small, because many of our possum traps are quite new so we don't have enough years of data to show depletion rates. Seasonally, the peak catches are December–March. Lowest activity is in July–September. Winter capture rates are roughly half the summer peak. The AI thinks our data contains strong evidence of general local depletion in trapped locations over time. The effect is not universal, but it is widespread enough to conclude:

- Most established trap locations are becoming less productive with age. i.e. we are catching fewer possums, probably because there are fewer possums in those locations.
- Catch rates commonly decline by roughly 40-50% over five to six years.
- The pattern is spatially clustered, which supports a real reduction in local possum abundance rather than simple trap deterioration.

Although most records don't state the age of the possum caught, some do, so we can see that juveniles are caught more often in a couple of seasonal peaks. That's a strong seasonal signature and lines up with possums' known breeding pattern — young from litters dispersing and becoming independent.

AT220 traps have increased observed possum catch rates compared with all other trap types combined, and that advantage persists even when comparing only recently established traps. AT220 seem to catch more possums, probably because they are almost always ready to catch, whereas a manual trap that is checked weekly can only ever catch 1 possum a week. There are reports of pigs damaging or stealing traps (bases ripped off, latches taken) — a recurring maintenance cost specific to a few sites. Have you solved this problem on your project? We'd love to share what you have done. Does your experience confirm or conflict with the above? We'd love to hear from you. We adhere to TrapNZ's data sovereignty guidelines available [here](#)



Waikato regional Council - Regional Resilience Depends on Diverse Ecosystems

New Zealand is one of the most biologically unique places in the world. Around 80 per cent of our native trees, ferns and flowering plants are found nowhere else in the world, and more than 70 per cent of our native breeding bird species are also endemic. The native ecosystems found here evolved without many of the pressures seen elsewhere, like predatory mammals. Because of this, they are often less competitive against introduced (exotic) species and sometimes need a helping hand.

Waikato Regional Council Senior Scientist of Terrestrial Ecology Dr Paul Dutton says: "The Waikato straddles the natural plant distribution boundary of both northern and southern species. This helps make it one of the more ecologically diverse regions in New Zealand. "But human activities have had a huge impact over time, causing some ecosystem types to disappear entirely and others to cling on only as small, isolated fragments. "More ecosystem types are at risk of collapse in the future, too, as a result of biosecurity incursions and land use change.

"Wilding pines are a prime example of this 'exotic incursion'. They often start as a sparse intrusion into tussock grassland but can eventually grow to become a closed canopy. This alters the light. It alters the soil. And the

recovery of the tussock ecosystem – and the species it supported – becomes unlikely without ongoing intervention.

The pūkeko is also known as the purple swamphen (*Porphyrio porphyrio*). They're most at home in wetland ecosystems. "Similar stories can play out across most other ecosystems, too, if we aren't proactive." Different ecosystems provide different habitats for different species. So, the greater the variety of ecosystem types, the higher the overall biodiversity. This variety isn't just a 'nice to have', it's essential to our survival, supporting clean air, water and food sources. That's because different ecosystems play different roles.

Forests absorb carbon dioxide, prevent landslips and help regulate temperature through a process called evapotranspiration – like the way sweating cools you down. It's one of the reasons cities full of concrete can get unbearably, even dangerously, hot, while forests remain pleasantly cool.

Wetlands, meanwhile, naturally filter water before it flows into rivers and lakes, trapping and enabling plants and microorganisms to break down harmful substances. They also absorb and store water, reducing flooding impacts during heavy rain. "Diverse ecosystems deliver a range of ecosystem services that help support the resilience of human communities," says Paul. "And the greater the variety of ecosystem types – and the biodiversity within them – the more naturally resilient they are to threats and pressures."

Monoculture forests are particularly susceptible to pests and diseases due to concentrated impacts on a single dominant species. In contrast, species-rich natural forests are generally more resilient, with biodiversity enhancing ecosystem stability and reducing pathogen transmission through the presence of non-host species. Image of two Variable Oystercatchers, Variable oystercatchers breed most commonly on sandy beaches, sand spits and dunes.

Following wildfire, neighbouring ecosystems, such as wetlands and riparian margins, can function as ecological refuge for animals, enabling populations to persist while affected areas recover. This landscape-level diversity enhances ecosystem resilience by supporting survival and recolonisation that would be compromised in a homogeneous environment. But the benefits don't stop there. By regulating soil and water quality, and supporting pollination, biodiversity helps support agriculture – which accounts for around 10 per cent of the Waikato's GDP. Biodiversity also underpins a thriving tourism sector – built on environment-focused destination branding – that contributes around 4.3 per cent (above the national average) to the Waikato's GDP.

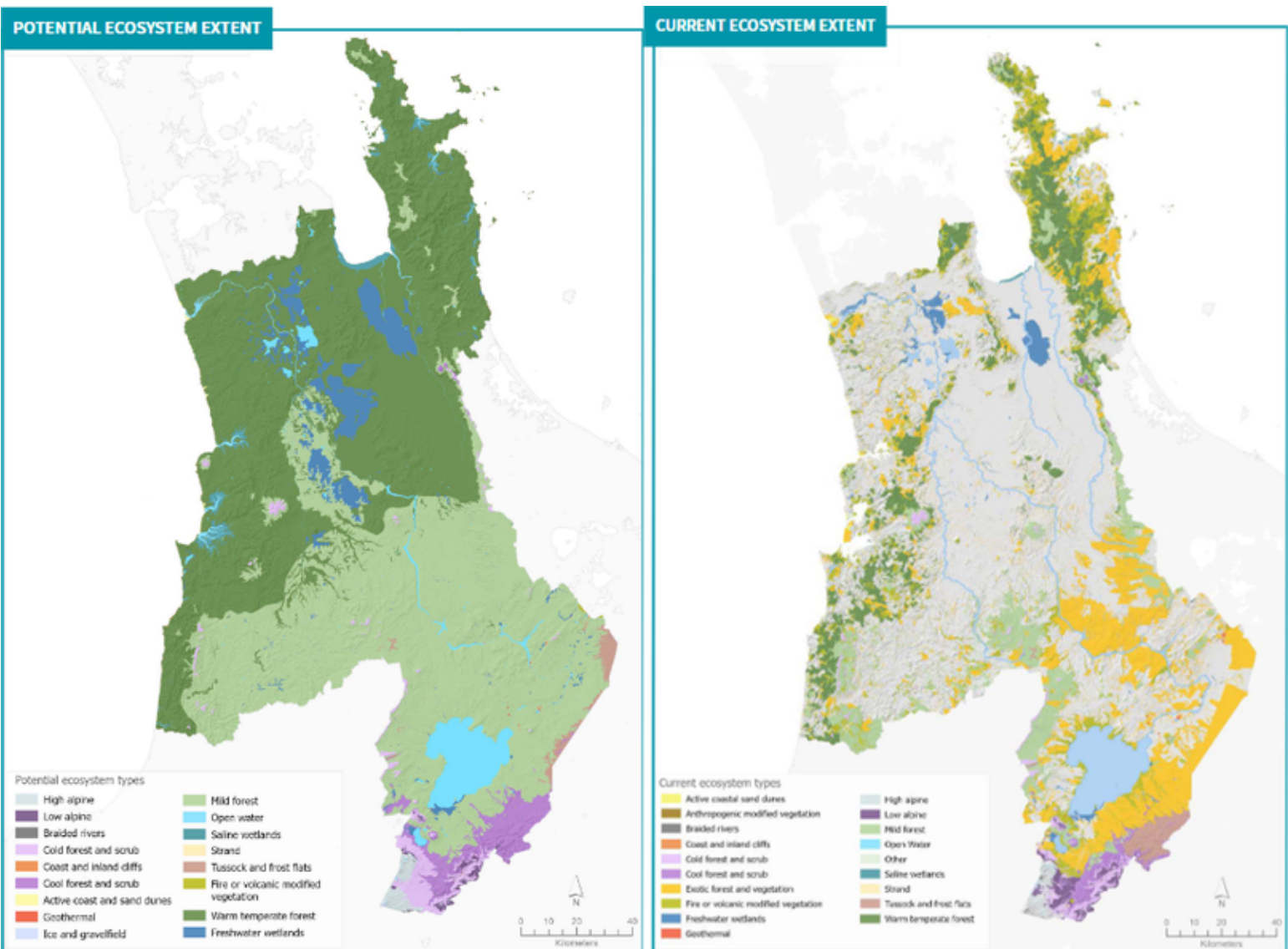
And the benefits don't stop there either. Because access to nature improves mental health outcomes, provides many different recreation opportunities, and supports cultural and national identity – helping to define who we are and shape our sense of belonging. "The environment, communities and the economy aren't separate spheres," says Paul, "they're interlinked and interdependent. Protecting and restoring our natural assets is a root and branch investment in the future of our region."

North Island Kōkako persist in small populations from the King Country through to Te Urewera, typically inhabiting tall native forest. "There are many community groups, land managers and agencies, including Waikato Regional Council, doing excellent work to support regional biosecurity and biodiversity. "Different ecosystems face different pressures, so the most effective approach can vary from place to place. While predator control, for example, can be highly beneficial in some environments, other ecosystems may require different interventions to achieve the best outcomes."

"That's why having a clear understanding of the extent and condition of Waikato's ecosystem types is so valuable. It helps people choose the right tools for the right places." "It's why my colleagues and I study ecosystems and why we're currently undertaking comprehensive mapping for each of them, assessing relative risks to their long-term survival.

"By doing this, we can help drive and support action to protect and restore our natural life support systems. And we can help channel people's efforts, and future funding, to the areas where, together, we can make the biggest difference."

Find out more about the 91 different ecosystem types found in the Waikato – including their key characteristics, regional extent and the threats they face – in the comprehensive and definitive report. [Ecosystems of the Waikato Region](#)



Whāingaroa Weedbusters: Community Volunteers Take On Privet and Pest Plants

You may have noticed small groups of people hanging about amongst the trees on the roadsides around Raglan. If you're wondering who they are or what they're up to, they are volunteers hunting privet. But that's not all they do. The volunteers are part of a small group of locals called Whāingaroa Weedbusters. The group was started five years ago by Liz Stanway, who you may know as the compost maker extraordinaire from Xtreme. She obtained a grant from Waikato Regional Council to explore community-led pest plant control. Leanne Steel joined in and kept the mahi going after Liz returned to her amazing work. At the end of the initial project Leanne met with local people who were



interested in clearing pest plants on the Kaitoke Walkway. The core group of about eight people meet somewhere on the Kaitoke Walkway two Saturday mornings each month to remove plants such as ginger, woolly nightshade, japanese honeysuckle, moth plant and of course privet.

The focus is on restoring and enhancing the environment for native species. Over time, this dedicated core group has extended its work to include other areas of weed need. For example, small groups each week work to control problem pest plants on public, council administered land. Privet on the roadside is a key focus because of the impact it has both on the environment and on peoples health.

Next time you see a group of people in the undergrowth, maybe stop and talk to them about what they do and consider joining them on their forays. Many hands make light work. Keep an eye out for our monthly pest plant column with Te Rekereke Taiao Trust, supported by Waikato Regional Council.

whaingaroaweedbusters@gmail.com
terekereketaiaotrust@gmail.com



Fundsorter The Funding Landscape: Waikato

We've just released our first regional analysis of grant funding across the Waikato. Working with a collaborative of Waikato funders, we looked at 4,894 grants worth \$82.7 million over a single year to build a picture of where the funding is currently flowing. The report is designed as a way to spark conversation rather than draw conclusions about individual funders. It's a shared evidence base, and an invitation to ask better questions together. Have a read and tell us what stands out to you. [Read the report here.](#)



Project Kiwi Trust works to protect Coromandel brown kiwi on the Kūāotunu Peninsula

The protection of Coromandel brown kiwi has received a boost with two years of council funding going to conservation group Project Kiwi Trust. The trust will receive almost \$40,000 from Waikato Regional Council's Environmental Initiatives Fund for the purchase of predator control materials and track maintenance.

This represents part of almost \$480,000 in grants made to 15 projects announced in the 2025 funding round. Established in 1996, Project Kiwi Trust works to protect Coromandel brown kiwi on the Kūāotunu Peninsula near Whitianga. For the kiwi population in the area to be stable and experience growth, pest and predator control needs to be maintained.

The trust services and checks over 500 traps targeting mustelids throughout the year. They also support a bait station programme that targets rats and possums over some 70ha. "The trust has strong local support, with a

mix of volunteers and contractors contributing to varied conservation activities such as check trap lines and bait stations, and regular kiwi surveys,” says Kaiwhakahaere Kaupapa - Project Manager, Paula Judd.

“People living locally are often life-stylers, who work part-time or are retired and have some time available that they want to devote to conservation.” Given the varied terrain, access to the network of traps and bait stations can be by quad bikes, four-wheel drive vehicles and walking. The efforts in support of kiwi conservation appear to be bearing fruit.

Since 2003, the trust has run a regular kiwi survey. Currently done every two years, the survey sees volunteers deployed to nine base sites over three nights. During a two-hour period each night, they record details about all the bird calls they hear and their location, along with other information such as atmospheric conditions.

Kiwi are also fitted with transmitters, so even though they may not call during the survey, it’s possible to detect them. An additional 17 sites allow for mapping of population change out of the core areas where kiwi have spread. The survey of base sites points to a growing kiwi population estimated at some 300 pairs, plus 150 juveniles and 150 chicks.

Data from the additional sites helps to identify where more traps are needed, especially when kiwi are producing chicks which are vulnerable to predators, especially stoats. The trust shares information collected with surrounding landowners and other conservation groups to make the best use of the data and support the best outcomes for kiwi. Paula has been involved with the trust for the past 17 years and finds the work rewarding.



“What’s really cool about the trust and my job is the ability to support others to advance our conservation objectives.

“At the same time, I love the variety, autonomy, limitlessness and progression. The work goes in every direction, and my brain is really stimulated all the time.” Paula supplements her part-time role with a regional coordinator position at Save the Kiwi. Waikato Regional Council’s Environmental Initiatives Fund is part of the Natural Heritage Partnership Programme. Find out more on the [Environmental Initiatives Fund webpage](#).



Purangi Conservation Trust - Watch the Fieldwork in Action

Laura Barton has shared a comprehensive set of AT220 Autotrap technical notes, covering maintenance routines, common troubleshooting steps, and practical field advice tailored specifically to the units installed on the Raumatiroa block. Recent camera monitoring has confirmed kiwi moving through the area, and the AT220



network is already delivering strong results, with consistent



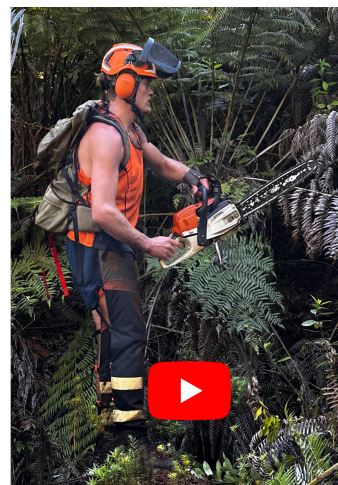
reductions in rat and possum activity across the site. The intense January rainfall triggered a number of slips across the Backdrop Trust area, with the largest slip cutting a clear path through existing vegetation

and extending all the way to the wetland. With funding provided by Predator Free Hauraki Coromandel Trust, a full revegetation effort was carried out — impressively completed within one day. The PFHC field support team, Ngāti Hei, Mercury Bay Environmental Trust, and a crew of dedicated volunteers all pitched in to get the planting finished.



In April, we were lucky to have the Predator Free Hauraki Coromandel field support team spend time in the Backdrop Trust area, reopening and improving several trapping tracks. Their efforts have made the routes far safer and more accessible for regular trapping work. We really appreciate the skill, pace, and enthusiasm they brought — it's made a noticeable difference.

A new line of AT220 Autotrap has now been installed across the stunning bush and coastal habitats of Lees Road, Hahei. Tim, Claire, and Mary — supported by Monty the dog — have taken on both the installation and ongoing data downloads for the line. Their efforts will help safeguard mature native trees and the wildlife that rely on them. Special thanks to Tim for bringing such energy and drive to the project.



Moths & Butterflies of NZ Trust

The trusts goal is to protect and promote the interests of our Lepidoptera. The trust has been working for 20 years to do that, although work has tended to focus on private individuals – gardeners etc. We are now developing a resource which we hope will be of interest to people such as yourself - those working to better biodiversity, sustainability, environment, parks. Volunteers or paid staff. In NZ we are blessed with much public land and if we could increase numbers of Moths and Butterflies in even

Cabbage Tree Moth

Epiphyryne verriculata



Meet the Cabbage Tree Moth, or Te Purehua noho ti. Endemic to New Zealand, its outspread wings exactly match the dead leaves of its host plant the Cabbage Tree (Cordyline).



Found throughout New Zealand although tending toward coastal areas in the South Island. Native Bush, forests, gardens, parks, anywhere that Cabbage Trees are found.



Eggs are laid in rows, mainly on the underside of fronds. Green caterpillars, loopers, emerge and make their way to the young leaves. Subsequently a silk-lined cocoon is formed in a sheltered site on or close to the Cabbage Tree.



This moth is a master of camouflage, its wings exactly matching the dead leaves of the host plant.



Wingspan of 20-30mm. Adults are seen spring through summer. They generally fly at night and they are attracted to light. If disturbed during the day, they will fly a short distance to land on another dead leaf.



Belongs to the Geometridae family, known for slender bodies and wide flat wings

New Zealand Red Admiral

Vanessa gonerilla gonerilla



Meet Kahukura, our endemic New Zealand Red Admiral. Considered the most beautiful of the admirals, it used to be common, but numbers are in decline. MBNZT and volunteers are working hard to bring it back with our Red Admiral Project.



Found across the country but no longer common. In Auckland, it all but vanished after an aerial insecticide campaign to eradicate the painted apple moth. At home in native forest, but also seen in shrubland, parks and gardens.



Preferred host plant is *Urtica ferox* or Ongaonga, the native stinging nettle, and other nettles. These species have been cleared in many areas, as they are seen as hazardous to people. MBNZT recommends planting in hard to reach places.



Known in Te Reo Māori as 'Kahukura', meaning red cloak.



Eggs are small and laid singly. The caterpillar is dark, small and spiky, often hiding in curled leaves of its host plant. The pupa is brown and unremarkable. The butterfly's bright wing colours mimic unpalatable species, but all stages are an important food source for our native birds.



Larvae find hidden places under tree leaves to form the chrysalis. The underside of the wings is much more subdued than the top, a camouflage mechanism. Adult wingspan 50-60mm.



For more information on the Red Admiral Project visit [here](#)

some of these spaces, that would be hugely beneficial to the species. We are calling the resource, the Public Spaces Project, work will be ongoing but we have started to put some content into our web site. [Link](#) to Public Spaces Project. Note this page has a number of links to further information. And you may find information of interest across the whole site. Enter the site [here](#). We are currently sending out a series called “Meet the The first two “guests” were the Cabbage Tree Moth and the NZ Red Admiral (Kahukura) – see images above.

Pūkorokoro Miranda Shorebird Centre - Who Speaks for Sura?

An unexpected visit to Pūkorokoro opens a window on the people defending the last living part of Saemangeum. Trudy Lane reports. The small group from South Korea that appeared at the front door knew all about the Centre. While looking at our display boards we began a conversation during which there surfaced that strange intimacy of meeting people from another world - who share a relationship with our migratory birds and their ecosystems. Over the next few days we talked, visited the reserve, hosted artist friends, and they sang for us a song for the Sura tidal flats - a surviving remnant of the once immense Saemangeum estuary - that they are working to protect. One of our displays highlights key staging sites around the Yellow Sea.

Many people associated with the Trust already know of the tragedy of Saemangeum. Once the most important shorebird staging site in the flyway, the Mangyeong and Dongjin estuaries formed an immense 40,900-hectare system of mudflats, sandflats, shallows, saltmarsh and channels that fattened up more than 300,000 birds on their migration north, and again for many of them on their way home.

As a 33km sea wall completed in 2006 fully enclosed it, it starved the area of tidal flow which in turn starved the shorebirds that had depended on it. For Great Knot alone, Saemangeum held around 30 per cent of the world population during migration, and monitoring documented a 93 per cent decline from 2006-2011. Approximately 104,000 were lost from 2006-2013, or one quarter of the world population of this species.

All this to make land: first for agricultural purposes and later recast within an evolving portfolio of “eco”, industrial and urban development.

This tragedy was experienced first-hand by Keith Woodley, Adrian Riegen and others, but it had remained at a distance for me. Yet that afternoon that area on the display map started to change. As I met the group and continued to learn more about their work, from their beautiful gifts of creative materials, the area also started to become a place inhabited by people who had spent years counting birds, working for wetlands, bringing court cases, making films, making banners and posters, and refusing to accept that a living estuary is merely “land” waiting for its next use.

The visitors were part of the loose, creative network gathered around Our Sura (oursura.org), a campaign supporting Sura tidal flat on the northern end of the Saemangeum area. Their arrival opened a small window into a struggle whose scale, endurance and imagination deserve to be better known here. And they are not alone - generations of protestors have fought for this site. For them, Saemangeum was never empty ground. It was a rich and diverse living system supporting shellfish, crabs, fish, saltworks, fishing villages as well as hundreds of thousands of migratory shorebirds. Proposed in the 1970s, construction on the seawall began in 1991. As the project advanced, opposition gathered around it: fishers worried about livelihoods; environmental organizations including the Korea Federation for Environmental Movement, Green Korea United and Birds Korea; scientists; residents; lawyers; and faith communities. Saemangeum became one of South Korea's defining environmental conflicts because people understood that the argument concerned much more than one construction project. It concerned what counts as a living place, and whose knowledge is allowed to matter. In 2003, that understanding took a form both spiritual and political. Four religious leaders — Catholic priest

Father Mun Gyu-hyun, Buddhist monk Venerable Su-kyong, Won-Buddhist teacher Kim Gyeong-il and Protestant minister Lee Hee-un — set out from Saemangeum for Seoul. They travelled about 300 kilometres by a practice called samboilbae: three steps, then one full bow to the ground, repeated over and over.



Green Korea poster



Saemangeum before and after enclosure: satellite images reveal the transformation of a vast tidal system into reclamation land. Images: ESA Earth Online.

It was not a stunt. It was an enacted humility, grief and responsibility before a living place. The pilgrims bowed not only for birds, but for the estuary's many lives and for the coastal communities tied to it. Their journey placed bodies on the road, slowing down a project driven by the speed and authority of the state. Click [here to read more](#)

Save the Kiwi- Rotoroa Island Kiwi Muster Update

We're pleased to share an update from Save the Kiwi following the kiwi muster undertaken on Rotoroa Island in the Hauraki Gulf in May 2026. Rotoroa has been a predator-free crèche site for Coromandel brown kiwi since 2014, providing a safe environment for young birds before they are returned to the Hauraki-Coromandel region or transferred to the Coromandel brown kiwi kōhanga on Motutapu. Kiwi have consistently thrived on the island, with 145 birds mustered and translocated since 2015. Around 36 kiwi are currently estimated to remain on Rotoroa.

During the first few days of this year's muster, conservation dog teams located two deceased kiwi and two deceased weka, as well as two live kiwi. As more than three dead birds were found in the same area at Pakatoa Point, the findings were reported to the Ministry for Primary Industries and the Department of Conservation.

As a precaution, the birds underwent necropsies and testing to investigate whether an infectious disease or other significant threat was present. The results were reassuring. Testing ruled out infectious disease, and the birds were found to be in good condition, with no evidence of toxin exposure or natural poisoning, including karaka berry

poisoning. While the exact cause of death could not be determined, there have been no further reports of dead birds on the island.

Following the investigation, Save the Kiwi, the Rotoroa Island Trust and DOC agreed that kiwi mustering can continue in accordance with current best practice. The investigation found no evidence of an infection risk to kiwi populations in the Hauraki-Coromandel region.

The Coromandel brown kiwi handling season runs from 1 January to 31 May, so no further mustering will take place this year. In preparation for the 2027 season, Save the Kiwi will deploy acoustic recorders and trail cameras across Rotoroa to better understand kiwi distribution, estimate the number of birds available for mustering and help target search efforts. At this stage,

mustering is expected to resume on Rotoroa in May 2027. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to reach out to Paula - coromandel@savethekiwi.nz



Te Whakaoranga o Karioi - From Manaaki Ao to DOC, Te Kaha's Conservation Journey

Te Kaha was born and raised in Whāingaroa and went all the way through Raglan Area School to Year 13 - a self-described "RAS jailbird". He took part in Manaaki Ao, our Raglan Area School-based environmental education programme, in 2017 and 2018. Delivered by the Karioi team, the programme used unit standards from agricultural pest animal courses, giving students the chance to gain NCEA credits through hands-on learning in an outdoor classroom.

At the time, Te Kaha's motivation was pretty straightforward; he needed the credits. "I didn't really think much of it. I just kind of threw myself in head first." But it quickly became one of his favourite subjects. A big part of that was getting out on Karioi. Despite growing up right beside the maunga, Te Kaha had only been up there once before joining the programme. "Spending time on our maunga, which I'd never really done... It was a nice thing to look forward to every week."

Since leaving school, Te Kaha says he has mostly been "figuring out life". There's been lifeguarding, a lot of cycling - including some fairly serious adventures - and a few unexpected moves along the way. Today, he describes himself as a friendly, chilled-out guy, "despite being quite a big dude covered in tattoos". He's approachable, quietly introverted and happy to go with the flow. He doesn't plan too much and isn't too worried about knowing exactly where he'll be six months from now.

One thing that did stick was conservation. Te Kaha had wanted to work for DOC since leaving high school, and he says his experience with Manaaki Ao and the Karioi Project played a real part in that. When asked what eventually led him towards DOC, his answer was simple: "Working with yous." He is now working with the Department of Conservation through a Tainui cadetship. Trapping was initially the big draw, and although he would happily do more of it, his main work at the moment is track clearance. He's also been involved in weed work, compliance, cat necropsies and other conservation tasks, giving him a broad range of practical experience. And he loves it.

He talks warmly about the people he works alongside and the satisfaction of doing practical work that people notice and appreciate. Track clearance, in particular, gives an immediate sense of achievement. "We get a lot of compliments from the public, depending on where we are - a lot of thank-yous." He's also rather proud of being the youngest person in the DOC office. And now he's come full circle - back volunteering on Karioi, the maunga where it all started. Looking back now, at 25, Te Kaha has some pretty simple advice for his 17-year-old self: "It took a while, but eventually you did get to DOC, and you're getting more out of it than you were expecting. So yeah, keep it up, bud." And for other young people wondering whether conservation might be for them? "If you do have those aspirations, go for it." Or, as his mate George puts it, it might just be "the best job in the world." <https://www.karioiproject.co.nz/>

