

WINDY HILL ROSALIE BAY CATCHMENT TRUST



Windy Hill Sanctuary Newsletter #41 December 2021

Season's Greetings

Back in 1999 when pest management started at Windy Hill a conservation sage said to me 'expect the unexpected'.

And indeed, there has been much to learn through the unexpected over time.

A case in point is the journey for our North Island Robins. More than 100 birds were reintroduced over 2004, 2005, 2009, and 2012 to Glenfern and Windy Hill Sanctuaries. Today, not a single bird remains in these places despite good nesting and fledgling success.



Last week however, as part of the third annual Aotea Bird Count, robins were for the first time formally monitored on Hiramakimata – their chosen place to establish on the island – with 3 out of 5 count stations recording pairs of robins. There have been years of reported sightings of these engaging birds from people walking on the maunga - two of our banded birds were sighted within a week of release at Windy Hill in 2012 ! What took them there we don't know.

It wasn't until Dr

Liz Palato completed her Master's on robin dispersal from 14 sites throughout NZ that it became clear that robins released into contiguous bush habitat like ours will establish and breed but chase all their young out of the area preventing recruitment. Eventually the localised population with no young ones will die out, as it has. However, we have succeeded in establishing the robin back on Aotea, albeit not where we expected. (Pic shows Kate Waterhouse counting birds on Hiramakimata).



Most unexpected has been how persistent the rats are. Despite some of the most intensive management in the country, year after year we trap between 2-4000 rats. All up we have trapped just under 62,000 rats and mice. The Sanctuary area with fewer rats, less competition, and more food abundance probably acts like a mega lure - we just keep drawing these animals in from surrounding land to rat heaven.

Little was known about the dynamic between ship rats and kiore when we started. In 2000 the percentage of kiore trapped was about 8% in the bush and 20% in the paddocks, now it's more like 55%. This same pattern has been replicated at Motu Kaikoura and Glenfern Sanctuaries.

When we started trapping in 1999, I did not imagine that trapping, in conjunction with a prudent use of rat bait, would still be the best method we could use in 2021. Despite a great deal of investment there has not come onto the market any cost effective alternative in all these years. It's still hard to beat systematic management on the ground with basic tools for rats.

Way back a plant guru identified the largest population of the rare plant *Pimelea Tomentosa* in the Auckland region in the Sanctuary. This rather



nondescript plant had survived because the feral goats didn't eat it but kept the plants around it cropped so the pimelea could grow and spread. Come 2004 and the goats were eradicated from Aotea. What we didn't expect was that the plant began to get crowded out with more vigorous vegetation and began to die off except in open areas. We have protected some of the plants left, gathered seeds, and are now selling plants in the Trust managed Aotea Community Native Plant Nursery. Hopefully, we can keep this species alive on the island.

We were told when we started out the idea was that if we just suppressed the rats and feral cats enough then everything would boom. Not so, particularly for birds. While we have clearly improved the abundance of kaka, kereru, and tui, some of the smaller birds have decreased in number or fluctuate from year to year. There are a few factors here – a significant one is that the bush is becoming more mature over time with food that suits bigger birds. When we purchased the Windy Hill property in 1972 there was over 100 acres of grass. Now, with no planting on our part, there is less than 1 acre left. This is a huge change in a relatively short time.

Finding eleven of the Aotea's known thirteen species of lizards in the Sanctuary has been a delight. Unexpectedly, some species like moko and copper skinks are found in greater abundance in the unmanaged Control site compared to the managed Sanctuary area. Perhaps diurnal lizards (out in the day) are more able to survive in the presence of rats. Four of the five rare striped skink identified were also found in the unmanaged area – the influence of habitat age and type plays a part here. Striped skink pic by Dylan van Winkle.



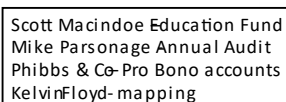
On a social level the negative feedback from some sectors of our community has been most unexpected. With the biodiversity of the planet in dire straits we must use every tool we have to halt the loss of further biodiversity. It's difficult to understand the logic of folk whose concern about toxin use leads them to publicly describing the Sanctuary landscape as toxic, especially when its teeming with seedlings, lizards, and birds.

The arrival of Predator Free NZ 2025 has hugely mainstreamed pest management as a practice for all New Zealanders. It was not remotely imagined that this project would go from being a conservation 'fringe dweller' in 1999 to a highly regarded award winning Sanctuary, and one that can provide knowledge and data for the new projects springing into action.

This year has been challenging on many fronts, not the least with Covid.

Thank you to our supporters and sponsors below who have enabled us to keep our field team kitted out, intact, and employed.

Field Manager Kevin Parsons has been a star this year keeping everything going and completing most of our Operational plan. Thank you to our team – Maxine Barrowman, Dave Harland, Dan Williams, and Corey Hardstaff. The Trust couldn't manage without our steady as a rock administrator Sue Thompson – another star. Our Aotea Community Native Plant Nursery Manager Phil Estrada e Santiago and his assistant Losel Davis have done an awesome job propagating and growing a good range of plants. Dave and Lotte McIntyre have completed all our biosecurity contract through some trying conditions. THANK YOU.



The Sanctuary will continue to surprise us with the unexpected.

We look forward to 2022 and perhaps, fingers crossed, the return of tieke to Aotea.

Nga mihi

Judy Gilbert

On behalf Trustees John Ogden, Rose Harland, Derek Bell