

**D**uring Conservation week, 1984, a small group of 20 members and other interested people met in the Oamaru Intermediate School with Dr Gerry McSweeney to discuss the formation of the Waitaki Section. At that time Oamaru was the largest remaining centre of population in New Zealand without a branch or section. It was fortunate that two people — Ross Babington and Annette Officer — were willing to take the key positions of Chairperson and Secretary, and so the Waitaki section was born. An active committee gathered around these people and soon programmes involving walks and talks were being organised.

Why had North Otago been without a branch for so long?

Perhaps it was because the nearest extensive indigenous forest was at Ohau, 150 km away, and the area was seen as dry, developed and uninteresting. Closer to Oamaru there are smaller remnant forests such as the Wainakarua Bush to the south and Kelceys Bush to the north. However, the committee soon discovered that the lack of forests was made up in other ways.

South from Oamaru Harbour, headlands and bays interrupt the continuous shingle beach lying to the north. This coastline is rich in bird life, and only three kilometres from the Chief Post Office is Bushey Beach, the habitat of a colony of 10 to 12 yellow-eyed penguins. One of the section's early well-attended field trips was to Bushey Beach with Dr Chris Lalas, a scientist with special interest in these birds. Several were seen on that occasion, the birds having just completed their moult. Here the yellow-eyed penguin breeding habitat is under ngaio, flax and boxthorn scrub. It is remarkable that they survive there, considering the accessibility to people, dogs and feral cats. Since that visit, members have taken an active interest in the birds living there and in December 1985 a "Friends of Bushey Beach" scheme was launched in conjunction with Jim Caldwell, a branch member, and Mr G. Hall, superintendent of Parks and Reserves, Oamaru.

### Penguin patrol

The scheme involves members and interested people being involved in an honorary capacity, patrolling and supervising the area, and generally keeping an eye on the welfare of the penguins.

One of the critical times is the "moult period" in late summer and early autumn when the birds come ashore for about six weeks. They do not feed during this period, and are susceptible to stress if frightened or disturbed. Often they will stand on the beach and allow a close approach, which makes them particularly vulnerable.

The interest taken by members and Borough Council staff appears to be having some results. This year, for the first time, the small colony produced five chicks, three of which survived to adulthood.

Just recently, however, a new problem has arisen — starving penguins. There are several theories as to the cause. These are: depletion of available feed because of intense squid boat fishing off the coast; a change in fish migration because of an un-

usually warm season and thus warmer waters; successive severe easterly storms which have stirred up fish feeding and breeding grounds off the coast. Perhaps all contribute to this problem which has not previously been observed. It appears that the rarest penguin in the world may have to contend with more than dwindling coastal forests. Fortunately Bushey Beach is now in the process of being made into a scenic reserve; the area has been fenced and regular trapping is taking place. All going well, the feeding problem should be temporary and improved habitat will see an increased yellow-eyed penguin colony at Bushey Beach.

(A recent letter from Annette Officer describes how the starving penguins are faring: "Most of the sick and injured birds are taken down to Janice and Bob Jones at Moeraki. The Jones are doing a marvellous job, feeding the penguins twice daily — it is amazing to see their fast recovery, and back to sea they go." — Ed.)

### Boatman's harbour blue penguins

Just around the corner at Boatman's Harbour, and in the disused Council quarry, is a large colony of little blue penguins. Their survival was placed at risk when some birds were accidentally destroyed by a fire lit by workmen employed by the Borough Council as a cleaning-up operation in the quarry. The Council claimed the quarry was to be re-opened to repair breaches in the breakwater; therefore they decided to fence off the quarry where about 40 little blue penguins have nested for a number of years.

The sight of 40 or 50 little blue penguins paddling up and down outside the fence in the evenings caused widespread concern among members and the general public. Following an approach by Mr Hall, the branch applied for a grant of \$2500 from the Minister for the Environment's Environment Council Grant Scheme to improve habitat, create trial nesting boxes, and fence to protect an area of Boatman's Harbour, immediately adjacent to the quarry. In the meantime, Councillor Helen Stead, who was sympathetic to concern about the fate of the penguins, arranged TV coverage.

Representatives of the branch met the mayor and some councillors. We agreed to alter the fence at the south-east end of the quarry, so some nesting habitat could be made available to the birds again, provided our branch met the cost. We were fortunate that the Salvation Army Works Skills Trust were able to provide people to help erect the fence.

The branch also obtained a grant of \$300 from the Colin Jones Trust and with \$100 from its own funds employed Robin Johnstone, a zoology graduate from Otago University, to research the feasibility of moving the penguins from the quarry to Boatman's Harbour. The results suggest this would be a very difficult, labour intensive operation. The best plan seems to be to provide good habitat at Boatman's Harbour. At present this site is being developed under the supervision of committee member Harold Coker and the fence

has just been completed using our Environmental Grant.

### High country giant lizards

Early this year a field trip to Macrae's Flat was led by Graeme Loh, a wildlife officer and executive councillor from Dunedin. This area is significant because both the grand skink (*Leiolopisma grande*) and the Otago skink (*Leiolopisma otagenense*) are found here. These very large lizards are restricted to Otago. Although deteriorating weather made photography and observation difficult, the sun did shine for about half an hour — enough to bring out a 200 mm grand skink and a 300 mm (about maximum size) Otago skink. These skinks, although fully protected species, are mainly restricted in the area from Middlesmarch to Lindis Pass. Research into these lizards' habitat requirements is urgently needed to find out how much unmodified tussockland they need to survive.

Shortly after this visit the branch held a camp at Omarama in the Mackenzie basin and explored the Ahuriri Valley. Lex Perriam, Senior Ranger for the Forest Service, was the guide, and members had a useful discussion with Ron Williamson, runholder of Birchwood Station, concerning problems of access, retirement of eroded Class 7 and 8 land and wetland protection. The Ahuriri is a unique area; above the Birchwood Homestead it is outstanding. Six hundred hectares of the upper valley floor is Unoccupied Crown Land which is likely to be added to the Birchwood Station pastoral lease despite opposition from conservation and recreation groups, including our Society.

It is possible to travel by vehicle to near Canyon Creek on the forestry road when conditions are good. Members had lunch at the top of the canyon and from there had a superb view into Upper Canyon Creek — Mt Barth area, which is part of the 5000 ha retired from Birchwood Station. All were convinced of the need to preserve the upper valley in full public control.

On the Sunday the group paid a visit to the Tara Hills Research Station near Omarama and had a useful discussion on high country issues with the officer-in-charge, Malcolm Douglas, and Lands and Survey Ranger, Fred David.

### Future conservation and education

The branch has a link with the Oamaru Intermediate School Environmental Group. The children there are at present propagating in their shadehouse ngaio and coastal *Hebe elliptica* cuttings for planting out at Boatman's Harbour, as part of the penguin recovery project.

The branch has also given strong support to national conservation issues such as stopping woodchipping and protecting nature in the high country. We have contacted our local MP, Jim Sutton, frequently on these issues.

There seems little doubt that the field trips, talks and issues in the North Otago region, some of which have been described above, have contributed to the rapid development of the Waitaki Branch.