

Minding the New Zealand Dotterel's business

By Ann Graeme, Forest and Bird Bay of Plenty Conservation Officer



New Zealand dotterel chick and egg

Along the east coast of the North Island from Northland to the Bay of Plenty are many estuaries, large and small. These estuaries characteristically run out to the ocean through a narrow entrance, protected by a sandspit.

To the endemic New Zealand dotterel, these spartan sandspits are prime Real Estate, their most favoured breeding sites. They provide bare sand with all round visibility where the bird's camouflaged eggs lie in the merest scrape of a nest. The sandspit also offers excellent feeding for the parents and chicks. They can forage for sandhoppers on the ocean beach, or when the weather is rough probe the softer sand on the sheltered estuary side.

However, this same real estate is also most favoured by holidaymakers. Many of the best dotterel spits now adjoin sprawling bach communities, and the lonely sand is now trampled by children, dogs and dune buggies. Even more remote sandspits are within range of trailbikes and buggies with their companion dogs. This invasion together with natural mortality has led to an alarming lack of breeding success for the NZ dotterel and for the variable oystercatcher which nests with them. The NZ dotterel population is estimated at fewer than 1,300 birds and oystercatcher numbers about 2,000. Both populations are in decline.

What can we do to enhance their survival?

Beginnings

In Waikato Forest and Bird began a project to protect the Wharekawa Wildlife Reserve just north of Whangamata on the Coromandel Coast. An area of sandspit was rope-fenced and signposted, and Waikato Forest and Bird financed a warden to "mind" the birds and record the nestings. In previous years no chicks were reared but after two seasons of protection 15 NZ dotterel and nine variable oystercatchers were fledged. The Department of Conservation now maintains and staffs the Wharekawa Spit, and a similar project at Waikawau Bay. Auckland and northern branches have also supported dotterel protection in Northland, particularly in Mangawhai.

This '88-89 summer Eastern Bay of Plenty Forest and Bird decided to set up a similar bird minder project at Ohope spit. The branch had scarcely any funds at their disposal, and the project would rely entirely on voluntary efforts. While volunteer "minders" were co-ordinated by chairman John Lees, the setting

up of the project depended on the enthusiasm and initiative of Ohope members Helen and Adrian Harrison.

In November 11 hectares of dune and sand spit were fenced using posts lent by the Whakatane District Council, 1.8 km of red binder twine provided cheaply by a local firm, ice-cream container plastic fence signs and homemade notice boards. Geoff Moon supplied bird photographs, encased in plastic by a Forest and Bird member to incorporate on the notice boards. The Whakatane Council loaned a wooden hut which was towed to the edge of the fenceline and provided essential shelter from sun, wind and rain. An information handout was prepared and 600 copies donated by the Whakatane Council. Both the council and the Whakatane DoC enthusiastically supported the project and provided staff to help put up the fence.

It was a big effort, but the monetary cost of \$41 was minimal. Best of all, the project was reported in the national newspapers, and reached the local community through the local newspaper where it was front-page news on three occasions. In December an "Open Day" was held and school parties were told about, and shown the project.

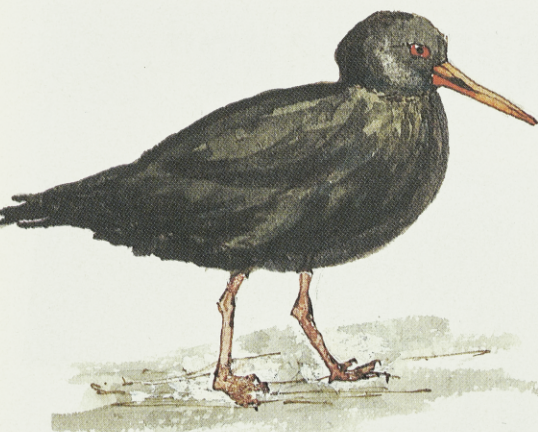
Roster of Minders

A roster of "minders" – Forest and Bird members and locals – "minded" the fence particularly in the holiday season, distributing the information sheets and explaining the project to passers-by.

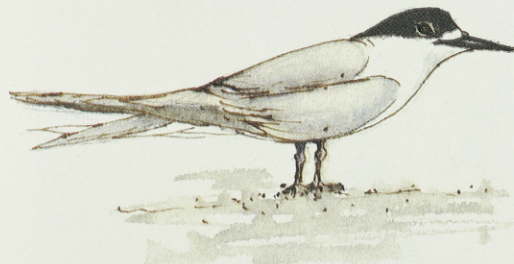
What did the project achieve?

Because the fenced area was so large it was difficult to accurately assess how many pairs were breeding – an estimated 10 pairs of NZ dotterels, and eight pairs of variable oystercatchers. In December numerous chicks were seen and nine NZ dotterel chicks counted, but the atrocious weather over Christmas and New Year made sightings difficult and probably increased chick mortality. However, by January many small groups of NZ dotterel and variable oystercatchers were together, presumably parents with "teenage" chicks.

Other species also benefited in the protected area. Six pairs of banded dotterels nested within the compound and flocks of more than 4,500 godwits and other migrants roosted undisturbed. Had the fence been erected earlier it would have benefited the white-fronted terns which in September had repeatedly tried to nest but had been driven away by motorbikes.



Variable oystercatcher



White fronted tern