

NZ DOTTEREL NATIONWIDE SURVEY

HELP NEEDED!

WHY? We need vital basic information about bird numbers and location before we design further projects to protect the Dotterels.

Forest and Bird, Ornithological Society of NZ and the Department of Conservation are co-operating in a major survey to gather this information.

HOW? Volunteers will be trained by DoC and OSNZ. We will walk the beaches and record information on NZ Dotterels from North Taranaki, around Auckland, Northland, Coromandel and Bay of Plenty to East Cape.

WHEN? Anytime over a 3 week period in late October (when the birds are in their territories) and again in autumn when the birds are in flocks.

WILL YOU HELP? Contact your local F&B branch or DoC office for details.



Helen and Adrian Harrison with their bird resting sign at the Ohope Spit.



Camouflaged eggs are one of the dotterel's few defences against a host of problems: dogs, stoats, trail bikes and general human interference. Photo: Brian Chudleigh



A distraction display by an adult dotterel in an attempt to lure an intruder away from the nest. Photo: Brian Chudleigh.

Project Update – June

In March the fence around the Ohope Spit was dismantled and a new sign has been erected, establishing the area as a bird nesting area until spring.

Recently 85 NZ dotterels were recorded in a flock on the Spit, probably the largest flock counted in recent years. It seems plausible that these flocks are important social groups where match-making takes place for the coming breeding season. In the flock was a banded bird from Waikawau some 200 km north.

Flocks of banded dotterels, variable oystercatchers and white-fronted terns are also congregating on the Spit with about 200 overwintering godwits.

This coming summer, Te Puke Forest and Bird plan to enlist the support of Maketu residents and set up a community project to protect the birds on the Maketu spit. Ohope and Maketu are the major breeding populations of NZ dotterels and variable oystercatchers in the Bay of Plenty, and their protection will significantly improve the chances for these threatened birds.

also suffered this summer when cyclone winds drove high seas right across the spit, destroying nests and chicks.

Perhaps this past season has been an aberration, but if as predicted it is indicative of the increasing tropical storms which may be associated with the greenhouse effect, the higher wider spits like Ohope may in future better reward our efforts of protection, particularly if the sea level rises.

Black-backed Gull Menace

A particular enemy of NZ dotterel chicks is the black-backed gull. These gulls are multiplying quickly because of their ability to exploit a new and growing food source – municipal rubbish tips. The growing colony of more than 1,000 on Matakana Island flourishes at the Tauranga City Dump. They also pick off local dotterel chicks and besiege white-fronted tern colonies in Tauranga Harbour, killing all the chicks in one season. Fishermen report them attacking little blue penguins, petrels and prions.

Many ornithologists regard black-backed gulls as a growing pest species which does not warrant the protection it presently enjoys. Philosophy aside, we felt it prudent to discourage a pair of black-backed gulls that attempted to nest in the Ohope sanctuary.

Perhaps the most endearing feature of these projects is the reaction of the birds themselves. At Wharekawa Spit after three years of operation the birds appear to recognise the protection of their fenced sanctuary and are becoming accustomed to people passing by. Although outside the fence parents will try to drive or entice watchers away from their feeding chicks, within the fence they are much less aggressive, and the gangly chicks, particularly the variable oystercatcher, will rest only a few metres from the fence. In contrast the birds at Ohope retreat with alarm and decoy behaviour from passersby. However the minders report after only a few months that the birds are becoming less easily disturbed and are more readily observed from the fence.

The survival of an increasing number of species is now at the whim of people. In the case of shore-nesting birds, not just money but public sympathy is needed to protect a lifestyle which is becoming increasingly risky. Our Forest and Bird branches can play a vital role in enlisting public understanding and support for the ornithological tangata whenua of the beaches – the NZ dotterel and the variable oystercatcher. 🦆