

Torpedoes over Muriwai

by Sioux Bennett and Phil Braithwaite



Gannets are supreme fliers and expert divers for fish. Photo: Rob Greenaway

THE GANNET folds its wide wings, black leading edges contrasting sharply with its pure white body, and plummets like a stone into the churning water below. From 10 metres up, the silver flicker of fish has been spotted and the never-ending hunt for food continues. The momentum of the dive and strong thrusting feet ensure another herring is caught in its sharp beak and the gannet resurfaces, lifting itself effortlessly from the tossing waves into a turbulent grey day.

It is late September and Auckland's west coast turns on a squally buffeting morning. As many of Auckland's surfing fraternity will attest, some of the best surfing conditions in the region are to be found where the Tasman

Sea rollers smash themselves to spray on Muriwai Beach. The word "Muriwai" translates from Maori as "backwater" – an apt name for what was until recently a quiet area for retirement, alternative lifestyles and fishing. Lately, however, Muriwai has grown: not just with surfers and city folk building weekend retreats, but also with a burgeoning colony of Australasian gannets.

The gannets have been nesting on Oaia Island just off the most popular surfing area at Muriwai since the turn of the century. The demand of a steadily increasing population for nesting space has meant a minor invasion of the mainland over the last few years and the birds have established nests on a precar-