

ious pinnacle of rock just offshore and a workable beachhead on a coastline outcrop opposite their original site. Apart from a late-night attempt at repulsion by some shotgun-wielding louts, locals have welcomed the gannets.

Forest and Bird's North Shore branch provided the spur to protecting the mainland population. In the mid-1980s branch members erected a fence to separate the humans from the birds. They then lobbied the Auckland Regional Council to build something more substantial, and provided some funds for the work. The Council, which administers all parks and reserves in the region, has improved the road and has also laid a short walk track to a decked lookout which provides an excellent view of the gannets' mainland foothold. Whether easier public access will bother the birds remains to be seen. However the ARC has ensured no trespassers venture onto the nesting area by erecting a high wire fence across the end of the outcrop.

From the lookout, it's clear the gannets are very territorial birds. Each nest – made of seaweed and grass cemented by guano – is placed a regimented distance from the next; in fact the pecking reach of an adult gannet. The birds are well-known for their elaborate courtship neckdances which precede mating, and each pair's single egg per season – a pale blue or greenish white colour – is laid around October. After incubation by both parents, hatching occurs within six to seven weeks, with one of nature's ugliest-looking chicks emerging. These demanding balls of down keep the adult gannets on constant food forays as they slowly grow to a juvenile stage of development and begin learning to fend for themselves. At this point they more resemble a mottled grey goose with an outsized beak than the sleek white adults with their custard-yellow heads that wheel on the cliff-top air currents above them. The grey juveniles stay around the colony until the big migration every February/March, when they brave the Tasman weather demons to reach the Australian coastline. There they stay for at least the next two years, maturing into the familiar white torpedoes, before being drawn like magnets back to their birthplace above the surfers at Muriwai.

This colony has the distinction of being one of three mainland colonies in New Zealand, although gannets breed at many offshore locations around the country. The other sites



*A demanding ball of down – a gannet chick. Photo: Rob Greenaway*

are at Cape Kidnappers, east of Napier in Hawke's Bay and Farewell Spit.

The Muriwai colony is easily reached by a 45-minute drive through farmland west of central Auckland. The birds are most in evidence during the breeding season but scarce outside that time. It is recommended you take warm clothing in case the rough coastal conditions accommodate the gannets more than people. 🦅