

BRANCHING OUT.....

Fur seals at Muriwai

GETTING DRENCHED by wild west coast surf and jumping from boats onto a rocky island to spend an hour among a group of bad tempered fur seals is not everybody's idea of fun, but this is exactly what a group of enthusiastic members from our Auckland branches and volunteers from the Environment Centre have been doing over the last few months. Their aim is to collect data on one of the northern most colonies of New Zealand fur seals (*Arctocephalus forsteri*).

Oaia Island, a wet and rough 1.5 km boat ride off Muriwai Beach, is home to a large number of Australasian gannets, and becomes overcrowded when at least 130 seals arrive during the winter months. Little is known about where the seals come from or how many use Oaia Island between May and November. The Forest and Birders are carrying out counts of the seals present at Oaia and observing their behaviour over the next few years. Information will be analysed to provide a useful picture of changes in this New Zealand fur seal population.



Volunteer Glenn Edney observes one of the fur seals on Oaia Island north-west of Auckland. Photo: New Zealand Herald

Waiau River water rights

WHILE THE SALE of the Manapouri Power Station has been grabbing the headlines, another side issue has been developing over the renewal of its water rights. Southland branch members have been sitting on the Waiau River Working Party along with other community groups and Electricorp to determine how much water gets diverted from the Waiau and Mararoa Rivers to augment Lakes Manapouri and Te Anau water levels.

Apart from Electricorp, nearly everyone seems to want sufficient Mararoa water to be returned to the lower Waiau River, instead of most of it going through the Manapouri power station and into Doubtful Sound. Branch spokesperson Christine Henderson says that if power users can save the equivalent water flow from conservation and/or energy efficiency measures then "we have a chance to change not only the course of a river, but also history. If we can do it on the Waiau we can do it for all rivers".

Bird minders guard New Zealand dotterel

SPECIAL "BIRD MINDERS" have been on hand at Omaha Spit and Stillwater, in North Auckland, since September, protecting threatened New Zealand dotterel while they breed. Local residents and volunteers from Mid-North and Hibiscus Coast branches and the Auckland Environment Centre have been spending weekends at these beaches giving out information leaflets and explaining the need for temporary restrictions on the use of these areas.

The total population of NZ dotterels has been declining since the turn of the century. Coastal subdivisions, dogs, vehicles and predators have caused numbers in the upper North Island to drop to only 1400. There are 13 pairs of

NZ dotterel nesting at Omaha Spit and five pairs at Stillwater and the future of these rare birds lies in their ability to breed without disturbance. Minders have been asking people to stay outside fenced areas and to keep dogs on a leash so that the dotterels can nest in peace. If the adults are disturbed from their nests, the eggs grow cold and the embryo chicks die.

The success of the bird minding programme will be known in December as hopefully some of the adults will have raised chicks.

New Zealand dotterel "bird minders" at Omaha Spit. From left, Claire Stevens, Northern Regional Field Officer Fiona Edwards, and Val Hollard. Photo: New Zealand Herald.

