

Road signs for penguins?



MARK BELLINGHAM

One of the bilingual signs on the Breaker Bay road designed by concerned locals.

WHEN YOU DRIVE around the coast from Wellington airport to Breaker Bay you will see a different type of road sign. It warns motorists to slow down because penguins cross the road here. For millennia blue penguins have probably nested in the vegetation along this coast and ventured out daily to feed in Cook Strait. In recent times a road was formed around the coast between their nesting and feeding areas, and over the past 10 years the number of cars and their speeds have

increased dramatically. Many penguins were being killed on the road at night, usually as they came in to nest or roost; more than 30 were killed in one year. A number of Breaker Bay residents, appalled by the carnage decided to try and stop the penguin deaths. They designed large road signs to warn motorists of the problem and erected these along the coastal road. With less deaths on the road and nest protection work by the Department of Conservation and the local Rotary Club, the penguins may survive in this city suburb.

sponsorship from Trustbank, in conjunction with DoC's Wellington Conservancy and Conservation Corps, has coordinated work on the nest boxes. Students such as those at Mount Cook school helped to build the boxes. The recently installed boxes have already been occupied by a few penguins and it is expected that their use will increase. In addition, the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries in Wellington has tried to "penguin proof" the storm water drains of their Evans Bay building to stop birds from entering the drains and becoming trapped.

DoC's West Coast Conservancy has recently undertaken surveys in north Westland to determine where to erect road signs warning motorists to look out for penguins which are frequently run over in the Paparoa region. The survey will also assist staff carrying out predator control. Unfortunately the survey results suggest that the local population is declining. Many empty burrows were found.

The most detailed New Zealand work is being carried out by Chris Challies on Canterbury colonies at Banks Peninsula and Motunau Island. His study has been ongoing for more than 20 years. At Godley Head, at the entrance to Lyttelton Harbour, ferret predation has been a big

problem in recent years with much of the colony being eliminated. Fortunately trapping now controls these pests. He has received Forest and Bird Canterbury branch's Stocker Scholarship to help him continue predator control and penguin monitoring work. Having already managed to get most of the breeders at Godley Head to start nesting in artificial boxes, he is attempting to re-populate the depleted colony by moving well-grown chicks from other colonies into boxes there. The idea being that a young penguin will return to breed wherever it spent its last days ashore as a chick, and wherever it first ventured into the sea. This technique has proven remarkably successful with many transferred chicks returning to Godley Head to breed.

Farmers and DoC staff are also working to control predators, especially ferrets, at Banks Peninsula colonies, and ferret-proof fencing is being considered around one colony (see *Forest & Bird*, November 1991).

At Oamaru, DoC and locals have tried to restore blue penguin habitat by improving the area for natural nest sites, constructing nest boxes and planting native coastal plants. The district council is funding a study on the penguins this summer.

CAN BLUE PENGUINS survive on the mainland? Without intervention the answer is almost certainly "No". Visiting Victorian penguin expert Peter Dann (who is in the country on an ANZAC fellowship to study and survey the blue penguin in Otago), predicted a bleak future for New Zealand's mainland populations:

"In Australia, dingos, foxes and dogs have largely restricted the population to offshore islands and inaccessible mainland sites. New Zealand populations face similar problems, particularly from dogs and ferrets."

There is no immediate danger of blue penguins becoming extinct because large island colonies can safeguard the long term survival of the species, but like kaka and kakariki, if we want to retain mainland populations active management will be required.

This should include:

- a nationally coordinated detailed survey, and follow-up monitoring, of all mainland colonies
- identification of areas where active management, such as predator control or chick transfers, is required and is feasible
- education programmes in areas where home owners and recreational users could cause problems for penguins
- establishment of dog-free zones around colonies
- formal protection of all penguin colonies and colony habitat restoration.

If blue penguins are going to be protected at sea we will need to reduce marine pollution, consider other species in the food chain when setting commercial fishing quotas, and outlaw the indiscriminate, wasteful fishing method of set netting which is a threat to all coastal seabirds and marine mammals.

Blue penguins are a source of delight to all who see them, yet we take them for granted. Unless action is taken now to halt the decline of mainland colonies, the sight of penguins in inshore waters will become a rarity away from island colonies. We will forget that penguins once nested alongside people under coastal baches, and those "penguin crossing" road signs will just become redundant relics of the past.

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