

important feeding and especially breeding areas for over 20 species of fish, mainly flounder, mullet, kahawai and inanga, and the extensive mudflats support a variety of tubeworms, molluscs and crabs which are a major source of food for wading birds. Historically the area was an important source of shellfish, with cockles and pipis and, on the outer coasts, sizeable mussel beds. There is little commercial fishing at present although flounder and kahawai were taken in the past and there have been limited attempts at aquaculture. Recreational fishing with nets and lines is popular at the mouth of the river diversion.

VEGETATION AROUND the lagoons has been severely modified in the past by Maori fires and, in European times, by stock grazing and burning accompanied by an invasion of introduced weeds, notably boxthorn and gorse. Only vestiges of native woody vegetation remain – scattered matagouri, manuka, shore ribbonwood and *Hymenanthera*. Saltmarsh areas are dominated by *Salicornia*, sea rush and introduced tall fescue, and there are extensive beds of horse's mane between tide levels. Flax and raupo, once abundant, have been reduced considerably by cattle, and their freshwater habitats lost.

Commercial exploitation became a threat in the 1970s with a proposal to extend the salt-harvesting activities of the Grassmere company into the Wairau lagoons. The Marlborough Catchment Board and Ministry of Works carried out preliminary research for some years but there was strong opposition from Forest and Bird and the Acclimatisation Society and the proposal never went ahead.

An ongoing problem is the pollution from nearby operations. Sewage from Blenheim has for many years been partially treated in oxidation ponds on the edge of the lagoon system before being piped to an outfall on the lower Opawa River which takes it to the sea. Periodic failures in the sewerage system have resulted in raw sewage entering the river and ongoing complaints about unacceptable levels of pollution. A second oxidation pond is being built and the district council is looking at options for further treatment and the best location for ultimate disposal.

In the early 1980s a large freezing works was built by Waitaki NZ at Riverlands on the outskirts of Blenheim to the west. Effluent from the works goes through aerobic and anaerobic ponds before being piped to an outfall where the lagoons open to the sea. To satisfy objectors at the time, the Planning Tribunal required baseline ecological investigations

Pied shag chicks on Big Lagoon.



GRAHAM MATTHEWS

which recommended ongoing regular monitoring.

The Marlborough branch of Forest and Bird tried unsuccessfully for many years to get public recognition and protection for the lagoons as a wetland important for indigenous flora and fauna. But until the mid-1980s, the attempts came to nothing.

One of the problems was the divided ownership of the wetlands. Known as Vernon lagoons, they were obtained by the Crown between 1844 and 1848. A number of tribes claim to be tangata whenua of the region and several claims have been filed with the Waitangi Tribunal covering the lagoons.

Title was then divided for many years between the Department of Lands and Survey, the Marlborough Harbour Board and the Marlborough Hospital Board. In 1956 Big Lagoon was proclaimed a wildlife refuge – primarily, it seems, to ensure a continuing supply of gamebirds for

shooting. The Wildlife Service became responsible for the wildlife but not for their habitat.

Lands and Survey finally took over full title to the lagoons and surrounding area in 1984. A draft Strategy Plan in 1985 recommending designation of the lagoons as a national reserve was overtaken by the changeover to Department of Conservation stewardship.

DoC has not proceeded with the comprehensive management plan that was hoped for, and the department's main activity in the area has been limited wildlife survey work and instalment of a public walkway to allow access to a restricted area.

PUBLIC CONCERN for the conservation of the lagoons came to the fore in February last year when a proposal was put to DoC and the Marlborough Conservation Board by the