



Braided river landscape typical of the Mackenzie Country, where rare and endangered birds are breeding. Project River Recovery aims to restore this form of landscape by removing weeds and researching effective pest control and creating protected wetlands. Picture shows the Hopkins and Dobson rivers and their associated wetlands, near Lake Ohau.

wetland and surrounding breeding areas have been predator fenced. Another 19 hectares of wetland have recently been created at two further sites, although they have yet to be fenced. A six-year study is currently underway to determine the relative conservation gains of wetlands with predator fences.

Wetland enhancement and creation, along with predator fences and trapping, have already proved highly successful, with a variety of birds making immediate use of them. Some wetlands have been used as release sites for captive-reared black stilt. A colony of 80 black-fronted tern nesting in the new Ruataniwha Wetland was another notable success. The birds nesting in the fenced wetlands have a much higher breeding-survival rate — over 90 per cent. Birds nesting outside the fences typically have less than a 40 per cent survival rate.

Fenced wetlands also have the advantage of keeping out people, who are another major factor in disturbing the birds. There has long been conflict between some anglers and river birds, while the growth of 4WD use has dramatically increased interaction and conflict in the riverbeds. The spring fishing season clashes with the breeding season and disturbance from anglers, walkers, drivers and dogs can cause birds to abandon nests and chicks. Four-wheel-driving can crush eggs and chicks, and the wake from a jet boat can swamp nests.

It is difficult for recreational users to see braided rivers as fragile nurseries for threatened species when they look like barren wastelands. To increase awareness of the needs of wildlife, an advocacy programme has been established to alert the public to the impacts of weed invasion, predation and disturbance. Signs, articles, pamphlets and press releases have been produced and riverbed access roads have been clearly marked to encourage the use of established tracks. A liaison officer was based at the Ohau-Tekapo delta last summer when adjoining campgrounds were full. A 'braided river care code' has been produced and efforts are directed at educating anglers to recognize bird disturbance, and respond appropriately.

Project River Recovery is producing the hard facts about conservation and the techniques which could save our threatened braided rivers elsewhere in the South Island.

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