

A tale of two islands

DAVE HANSFORD/ORIGIN NATURAL HISTORY MEDIA



Local schoolchildren with decoy gannets on Mana Island, near Wellington. The children helped paint the concrete models and visited the island the day the gannets were set in place. While birds soon came to look, they failed to stay and found a colony. Now sounds recorded in a gannet colony will be added as a further inducement to the birds to settle on Mana.

Tuatara, skinks, geckos, giant weta and takahe are the main species flourishing on two islands off Wellington, as a result of concerted efforts by branches in the region. On Matiu/Somes Island in Wellington Harbour, Lower Hutt members have been working on a revegetation plan for nearly twenty years. Since 1981 branch members have carried out annual plantings on the southern, western and inland slopes of the island, building up from the few native species, such as ngaio, cabbage tree, koromiko and taupata, which had survived generations of settlement, grazing and fire on the island. An estimated 64,000 trees and shrubs have been planted, either from donated plants or seedlings grown in a nursery on the island.

Lower Hutt Forest and Bird has also supported the Department of Conservation with the installation of a trickle-irrigation system to combat recent droughts. Branch chairman Stan Butcher says the irrigation was necessary after half of the 8000 plants put in over the last two years were lost because of dry conditions.

Up until this year the Lottery Grants Board has sponsored the big ferry bill for fortnightly working parties to Matiu/Somes. The branch is now looking for a new sponsor, and is determined to continue its efforts on the island.

'I think because Somes is a very attractive place to go to,' says Stan Butcher, 'the team we've developed has really warmed as a group.'

The branch's revegetation efforts are certainly helping to restore the natural integrity of Matiu/Somes. Last year the island became one of three rodent-free islands where tuatara have been released as part of the tuatara recovery plan conducted by DoC. Because of the healthy presence on the island of lizards and invertebrates — good tuatara food — DoC believes Matiu/Somes could eventually support a population of about 1000 tuatara.

Meanwhile out on the Wellington west coast, combined branch efforts have made a big difference on Mana Island. Ten years ago Wellington branch helped DoC rid Mana of its huge mouse population. Since then Mana branch members have carried out a revegetation programme that has resulted, in recent years, in up to 30,000 plants being planted in a season. While DoC runs the island nursery, Mana has been providing the 'bodies' to carry out the planting work and has organized follow-up trips for plant maintenance. Planting organizer, Alan Bryant, says that other groups, such as tramping clubs and Federated Mountain Club members, have also pitched in on planting weekends.

Since the mouse eradication, Wellington branch has been involved in other Mana projects: helping with wetland development, establishing an interpretation centre in the old woolshed, helping with a successful search for the goldstripe gecko, setting up a colony of gannet decoys and, recently, installing a gannet sound system. (See box.)

The work has paid dividends. Island populations of goldstripe geckos, McGregor's skinks and other lizards, and the giant weta are flourishing. Also present are North Island robin and little spotted kiwi, and the largest population of takahe outside Fiordland. DoC now plans to release, progressively over the next decade, other native birds, such as the yellow-crowned parakeet, as well as a wide range of invertebrates.

Branch involvement on Mana will change next year, with the formation of the new Friends of Mana Island Society set to take over the work of the Mana Branch, which is refocusing its efforts on mainland projects. The president of the new Society will be Colin Ryder, who has been involved with Mana as a Wellington branch member. He says helping on the island provides a great opportunity to participate in one of the major ecological restoration projects in the country. 'Volunteers can stay out there for several days and help with weeding, seed gathering, planting, beach clean ups. It's a great opportunity for people with overseas friends visiting.' — Kathy Ombler.

Schoolchildren on a visit to the former quarantine island of Matiu/Somes in Wellington Harbour. Lower Hutt Forest and Bird has been active in the restoration of this island since 1981, and also jointly manages a lodge there, with the Department of Conservation.



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