

Rhythm of the wetland

SARAH GIBBS visits Forest and Bird's Matuku Reserve, now part of a restoration programme in the ranges west of Auckland.

Partially protected by the forested hills of Matuku Reserve, the Te Henga wetland is the largest relatively unmodified freshwater wetland in the Auckland region. In summer, it is awash with brilliant green raupo with silver rippling across open blue-green ponds. In autumn the green becomes progressively tinged with a rich russet red as

Northern coastal forest clothes the hillside of Matuku Reserve, west of Auckland.

the raupo succumbs to winter frosts.

Around 20 hectares of this wetland lies within the Matuku Reserve and can be accessed by a boardwalk. In spring, the metallic duet of fernbird pairs can be heard, while the resounding boom of matuku, the bittern, punctuates the constant whisper of rustling raupo. The vegetated areas are also interesting for, although they look like solid islands and peninsulas, many are in fact floating pontoons of vegetation more than a metre and a half thick.

When Forest and Bird first acquired Matuku, the wetland was covered in an almost continuous mat of this floating vegetation and there were no large areas of open water. This all changed on July 1, 1979, when heavy rain coincided with a spring tide at Bethells Beach, downstream, and a full Waitakere reservoir, upstream. With the water table already high and drainage impeded by the high tide, the valley flooded dramatically. For about a day, only the tops of the cabbage trees could be seen above the water and Matuku's volunteer ranger, John Staniland, says it was the one and only time he has ever seen fernbird in the forest area.

The flood rolled up huge carpets of floating vegetation and swept them into the sea, creating large open ponds within the wetland. Within 24 hours the floodwaters had receded, but the ponds have remained, resulting in a mosaic of habitats that attracts

a wide range of water birds.

Rising above the wetland, nearly to the ridgeline of Jonkers Road, Matuku Reserve protects round 80 hectares of northern coastal forest as well. Embracing the steep slope of the widest valley in the Waitakere Ranges, Matuku is the Society's second-largest reserve. More than 300 species of plants have been recorded, along with 45 bird species (five of them threatened), six species of native fish, one native lizard and numerous insect species.

A platform near the top of the reserve offers expansive views over the forest, wetland and out to coastal headlands. There is also a spectacular cliff view down a waterfall valley to lush lowland forest, including a grove of around 200 nikau. A

Flaxes and cabbage trees border the wetland area. A boardwalk gives access to the wetland.



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