

# Help for Muttonbirds to Survive on Taranaki Clifftop



Grey-faced petrel, rare now on the mainland where it was once widespread, nesting in burrows during winter. Known in Maori as 'oi' the bird is one of the traditional muttonbirds of northern tribes.

The dwindling population of grey-faced petrel (oi) along the Taranaki coast has concerned the North Taranaki branch of Forest and Bird for many years. Now a cliff-top fence may save this unusual mainland colony.

The breeding burrows of the petrel and many other seabirds once honeycombed the coastal forests and shrublands. When rats, cats, stoats and ferrets were introduced to New Zealand by early settlers these predators systematically destroyed most

mainland colonies of grey-faced petrels. Fortunately, they have continued to breed on off-shore islands that are free of these predators.

In Taranaki, the species survives on the Sugar Loaf Islands and at several very small sites on the North Taranaki coast. The largest of these is at Rapanui, about an hour's drive north of New Plymouth. Here about 50 pairs of birds nest on the offshore stack and coastal cliffs, the southernmost colony on the west coast of the North Island. There are also two other burrowing seabirds that visit Rapanui; these are the diminutive diving petrel, and the fluttering shearwater. Every year dead birds are found that have been the victims of predators. There is concern that these birds could disappear from the Taranaki coast.

Rob Molloy, the Forest and Bird representative on the Taranaki Tree Trust persuaded the Tree Trust to take on the project to protect the birds at the Rapanui site. While the grey-faced petrel is not a nationally threatened species it was agreed something had to be done before these birds disappeared from Taranaki. The Tree Trust, supported by the Taranaki Regional Council, undertook to talk to the landowners, and prepare a plan to protect the birds and seek sponsorship.

Once the landowners had sat on the cliff at sunset and seen and heard the birds crashing through the vegetation when returning to their burrows they were excited about the project. For the birds to survive (and hopefully flourish) the key is to protect them from predators. After discussion of the possible protection methods, the concept of fencing the area with a predator-proof fence to provide a safe haven for the birds was considered the best option.



MAGGIE BAYFIELD

Abseiling to construct the fence. The protected area ends at the cliff face with a projecting fence to exclude pests which kill the burrow-nesting birds.

The Xcluder Pest Proof Fencing Company designed a unique fence around the small coastal basin, extending over the steep cliff edges at each end. Generous sponsorship from Shell (Petroleum Mining) Company Ltd enabled the construction of the fence and pest-management staff of the Taranaki Regional Council undertook a blitz operation to ensure there were no predators inside the fence.

The site was officially 'closed' by the Minister of Conservation, Hon. Chris Carter, on March 13, in front of a large crowd of conservationists, school children, locals and the many people who had been involved in the project.

Enhancement work is continuing with the clearing of exotics and planting species natural to the area. Staff from Shell Todd Oil Services have already had two working bees and planted a large open area with flax and taupata.

The birds have since been back to clean out the burrows, checking out their improved home. They go to sea 'on honeymoon' before returning in late June/July to lay their eggs. It is hoped that future monitoring will show this to be a successful breeding season — the first of many to come.

— MAGGIE BAYFIELD

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