ANNUAL REPORT 2023-24

Message from the Chair

Our vision continues to be that "Sea and shore birds and their habitat of the West Coast Te Tai Poutini are healthy and thriving".

Our Mission is to achieve the vision through research, education, awareness, advocacy and practical projects, founded on strong science.

After three years as Chair, I will be handing the role over to a rotating roster of Trustees at the August AGM, as I have been spending too much time overseas lately to do it justice. Nevertheless, the conservation of penguins and West Coast ecosystems is still a very important part of my life, so I will remain on board as a trustee.

The 2023-24 year has seen a fresh start for the Trust as our Education Ranger, Lucy Waller, took on the additional role of general Ranger, but also a long hard look at our funding streams and the sustainability of our operations.

In my message a year ago, I acknowledged that the Trust has relied upon funding from DOC for half of our operational expenses, and that the DOC funding appears to have dried up. With an increased focus on fundraising and grant applications, we are faring better than expected a year ago and are quietly confident that we will continue to do so. We've had to make some tough decisions around our reduced budget but we believe in the value of our work and the need for it to continue.

We are immensely grateful for everyone's support and hope it will continue as we work towards our vision of a healthy and thriving Tai Poutini.

Thank you, with appreciation for all your help - ngā mihi maioha

Robin Long, Chair, West Coast Penguin Trust
August 2024

Highlights of Trust Projects over the Year

Little penguin / kororā monitoring

- An improved season this year for kororā on the West Coast in comparison to last year, particularly at one of the two monitored sites at Charleston, Rahui, but still a relatively poor season in comparison to earlier years at our second site at the Nile River. Both colonies had a slow start to the breeding season, with the first eggs laid in late August but the majority laid in mid-September, which makes a very late start for 2023.
- Our first chick arrived at the Nile River colony at the beginning of September, but the majority of chicks arrived at the end of October. However, even with the slow start, 57% eggs fledged at that site, which was significantly higher than last season's 35% and 2016 and 2017 (37% & 43%), but still significantly lower than the seasons of 2020 and 2021 (73% & 82%). The Rahui site had a greatly improved 80.4 % breeding success rate (chicks raised over eggs laid where 100% would be all eggs hatching and chicks fledging) in comparison to last year's 45%, so seemed to be back on track.
- As an example, one indicator nest box pair, which usually lay the first eggs and start the season off according to our records, did not lay until early September, had a failed attempt and then a second attempt in early October, which successfully fledged two chicks.
- Interestingly, there were fewer breeding burrows this year at the Nile, than last year, but more breeding attempts, with more chicks hatched and successfully fledged. Additionally, there were 11 failed attempts at the Nile River, which is fewer than last year's 13, but second attempts and third attempts were made by penguins in those burrows. However, although it seems likely, because these penguins are not microchipped, we cannot confirm that they were the same pair attempting breeding in those second and third attempts.
- We were interested to note that natural burrows at the Nile colony in Charleston and also in nest boxes at Camerons had a penguin moulting directly after chicks had fledged. Oamaru Blue Penguin Colony advised that this is unusual as the adult penguins of that burrow would need to go to sea to feed and put on weight before a moult. Thus, it would have been a different penguin finding shelter for a moult, also very unusual. We will be microchipping penguins at the Camerons colony from the 2024 season and will be able to learn much more about the behaviour of individual penguins.

1. *Two blue penguin / kororā chicks in a natural burrow*
2. *Kororā chick in a nest box*

- For the 2023 season, we also monitored four other sites along the Buller coast twice this season for an indication of population trends. Sadly, one of those, at Punakaiki, has had just one or no breeding burrows in recent years and this year was no different. This tiny colony is protected by our first and trial section of penguin protection fence above it on State Highway 6; however loose dogs are likely to have killed any penguins attempting to nest there. The other colonies had less failed attempts than during the 2022 season when we experienced a marine heatwave.

- We also started to look at Camerons Beach colony this season, replacing and installing additional nest boxes and liaising with the local community there, and will regularly monitor the colony during the 2024 season, in place of the less accessible Nile River site.
- Our very grateful thanks go to former ranger, Matt Charteris, and his family for their monitoring of little penguins on their coastal property in Charleston over many years and sharing the data with the trust. Their passion for the protection of kororā has ensured that the colony is growing.
- Without funding from DOC and with grants hard to come by for ongoing field work, we rely on generous donors to keep this foundational work going. Match-funding from a major supporter of the Trust has been key to this work over recent years and we're very grateful to them and to those who supported those campaigns.

Penguin protection fences

- Ten years on, the Coast Road penguin protection fence is keeping kororā safely off the state highway. Prior to each of the 2023 and 2024 breeding seasons, two major gaps in the original fence have been filled, ensuring the better protection of penguins in those areas. We are grateful to Waka Kotahi NZTA for their support since the fence was first suggested, financial and otherwise, and for the support, management and completion of the project by the team at Westreef, led by Rota Carroll.

Illustration of the value of the penguin protection fence – on the left, before the fence was installed, on the right, with a dead penguin recorded at a gap in the fence that was filled in June 2024.

New section of penguin protection fence being installed by Westreef

- The Hokitika Fence, sponsored by Westland Milk Products, continues to protect penguins from the highway on the northern side of Hokitika and their ongoing support is hugely appreciated.

Penguin fence beneath Houhou Creek rail bridge

Foraging study – GPS tags for kororā

- We had hoped to relaunch and extend our kororā foraging study during the 2022 season, with generous support from the Brian Mason Trust and the Environment & Heritage Lottery Fund. However, it quickly became apparent that the penguins were under stress, probably due to the marine heat wave, and the call was made to cancel it for the season before it began, to avoid further stressing the birds. Both grant funders agreed to an extension so that the two year study could take place during the 2023 and 2024 seasons with the guidance of penguin scientist, Dr Thomas Mattern and new ranger Lucy Waller. The site was moved to the Camerons beach colony for ease of access (closer to Ranger base in Hokitika, and penguin accessibility in nest boxes) and a pilot study undertaken there.
- Four birds were fitted with loggers from four different nest boxes. We had results from three of the loggers largely covering two trips per penguin. Recording of the second trips for two of the birds was not quite completed as the batteries failed. However, the six trip records gave us useful information about the foraging journeys over three days made by those penguins. It showed they mostly stayed within 30km offshore to forage, which fits with our earlier studies from Charleston indicating that foraging remains approximately within the 110m bathymetric contour and an average range from home of 26kms.
- Compared to a similar kororā tracking study that was conducted at the same time out of Port Taranaki, Camerons beach penguins travelled twice as far away from their nest sites to find food. This raises the question whether this is typical behaviour for the West Coast birds or a result of poor foraging conditions closer to the coast. Additional GPS tracking in 2024 at different stages of the breeding cycle will provide crucial insights.

Trapping to protect seabird colonies

CAPE FOULWIND

- The trust maintains a network of 22 traps at the southern end of the Cape Foulwind walkway, with the twin goals of maintaining the predator-free status of nearby Wall Island, where seabirds nest on every inch of the island, and protecting any sooty shearwaters which breed on the mainland in this area. Monthly trap checks were carried out throughout the season.
- During the 2023 breeding season, ranger Lucy Waller monitored a selection of the sooty shearwater nests at the Cape Foulwind site. The Trust has seen a few more birds nest there over the years but never seen any chicks survive. No chicks were seen on the burrowscope this last season. Weka were witnessed and recorded entering repeatedly into the sooty burrows with birds sitting on eggs and staying in there for several minutes. It seems likely that weka will be taking chicks as soon as they are hatched, a very natural situation but very disappointing. We hope to better understand the situation with further monitoring during the 2024 breeding season, approximately November to January.

A sooty shearwater in its Cape Foulwind burrow

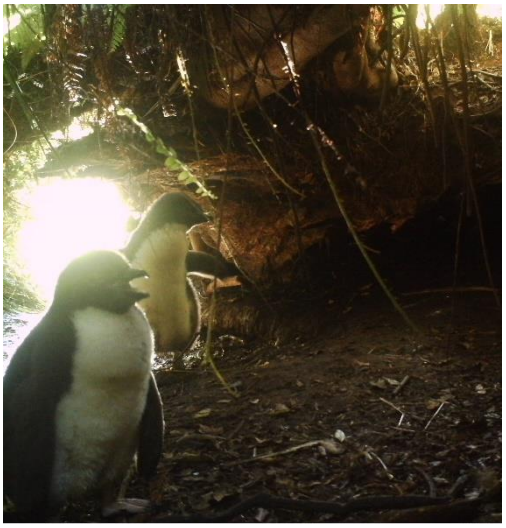
SEAL ISLAND

- Seal Island, a few kilometres north of Punakaiki, juts out north from Kaipakati Point. It is home to spotted shags and sooty shearwaters … plus mice but is otherwise predator free. The island is connected to the mainland at low tide and our predator control project is aimed at keeping the island rat, weasel and stoat free. Trustee and volunteer, Margaret Costello, with the help of her husband Jim, has installed and maintained predator traps on the mainland adjacent to Seal Island for seven years. Huge thanks go to Margaret and Jim for all the patient, regular and valuable effort over the years. A colony of little penguins / kororā also nest in this area, protected from the highway by a section of our penguin protection fence.

Seal Island at low tide showing the wave cut platform that joins the island to the mainland

Fiordland crested penguins / tawaki

- It was a surprising season for tawaki at all three of the colonies we monitor in South Westland. Dire results were anticipated due to the forecast arrival of El Niño conditions and our previous experience of the strong El Niño conditions that started in July 2015. However, possibly due to the El Niño arriving later, in September and well into the breeding season, and not being as severe, tawaki had a very successful season. (Handy short introductory video to El Niño and La Niño here from NIWA.)
- Ranger Sarah Kivi returned to the trust to undertake the monitoring at two sites, one each north and south of Haast. One site had 17 nest checks completed twice in the season with 28 eggs recorded on the first visit and the second visit showing 17 nests still occupied, one failed attempt and 18 chicks. Three of the nests included two healthy, similar-sized large chicks – highly unusual. The usual breeding strategy for crested penguins is to focus on the second hatched and larger chick, which is usually the only one to survive.
- The second site had 14 nest checks completed twice in the season, the first finding 13 nests occupied and 20 eggs, and the second check showing 14 nests occupied, two failed attempts, one nest not breeding, two nests with eggs and 13 chicks, and again highly unusually, three nests with two healthy, similar-sized large chicks.
- Our Gorge River site monitored by Catherine Stewart also reported a similar success story with nine nests of ten monitored with cameras successfully raising one chick to crèching. Double clutching – raising two chicks – was seen or assumed in a remarkable seven of the other 17 nests monitored, near the end of the chick guard phase. The presence of two chicks was confirmed almost to fledging in four of these. However, no photo showed two chicks together with the parent to distinguish them from two chicks from separate nests crèching together. After the chick guard stage, tawaki chicks gather in groups or crèches with an adult or two keeping an eye on them while other adults forage.



1. *Tawaki chick in natural burrow in South Westland*
2. *A two chick nest in Gorge River*

- We would like to acknowledge the wonderful annual support from the Wellington Zoo Trust, which supports our monitoring and better understanding of tawaki. Our research puts us in a strong position to advocate for better conservation management of this taonga species.

Westland petrels / tāiko

- Over the years, the trust has participated in and supported research to understand and improve the conservation of Westland petrels. Our late Chair and scientist, Kerry-Jayne Wilson MNZM, was key to that focus, being recognised internationally for her work with and knowledge of seabirds. Our role is more as an advocate now, speaking up for tāiko and their habitat as needed, and referencing Kerry-Jayne's research.

Education

- Education remains a key component of our work. We know that giving children an understanding and appreciation of penguins and their environment is an excellent way to help them develop an enduring love for nature. Those lifelong values start with understanding and connecting to nature and our programme does that through everyone's favourite, the little penguin or kororā, and extends to other seabirds. It appears to be increasingly difficult for schools to incorporate community-based locally relevant learning and environmental studies into their schedules due to more curriculum changes. However, local schools and teachers that have been working with us for years still very much see the value and the importance of helping their students to respect and empathise with their local environment and nature.
- Times are tough for environmental programmes and collaborations are key. We would like to thank Sustainable Coastlines for our work together on litter survey programmes and linking kororā into that project. We would also like to thank Enviroschools for their collaborative work throughout the year.

1. *Hokitika Primary School doing a penguin track spotting investigation at the local beach*
2. *Kaniere Primary School building nest boxes*

- We have carried out several school projects in the last year, mainly nest box building and raising awareness activities. We also worked with a local High School to help with their adaptations science unit and carried out another very popular and successful dissection class. We now have some fantastic teachers out there who are trained in penguin education and can carry the programme through themselves, with some support from the Trust along the way. A great success.
- We have been working with Mohua (Golden Bay) Little Penguin Trust to adapt our educational resource for their region and the new edition has made its way into local schools this year.
- We continue to be grateful and honoured to be working with many wonderful and committed teachers across the region and their students. We are also enormously grateful to the following for grants, without which, this programme would be much reduced: the Sargood Bequest, the West Coast Community Trust, and the Lion Foundation. Donations from our generous supporters also keep this enormously important and valued work going.

Awareness and advocacy

- Through our website, Facebook page, newsletter, media releases and occasional public events, we continue to raise awareness of threats to penguins across the region and to interested folk around the country and around the world. We offer guidance to minimise risks, particularly for dog owners and those driving on the coast road after dark, we invite donations and connect our community to our projects and the nature on their doorstep as much as possible.

- Advocacy is another essential area of work. Our support for the protection of penguins and other threatened seabirds could be relevant for anything from individual resource consent applications in coastal areas to plans, policy and legislation at regional and national levels. For example, we share our knowledge of the location of penguin activity with planners and developers and propose actions or conditions that could keep penguins and other seabirds safe if development goes ahead. We must remain vigilant as staff change and penguins may be forgotten, perhaps donning a hi-vis vest and jumping into action to protect known penguin nesting areas when diggers approach.

West Coast Penguin Trust Board and beyond

- We welcomed Deborah Carden to the Board earlier this year and the trust has already benefited greatly from her extensive conservation and management experience. Other Trustees are Robin Long (Chair), Jill Cotton (Founding Trustee), Margaret Costello, Martin Abel and Suzanne Hills. Each brings a great deal of skill and experience to our small team and we are enormously fortunate that they contribute their time to ensure the success of the trust's work. Recently, we reluctantly accepted Suzanne's resignation, as she focusses on conservation and the environment more broadly and urgently for the region as Chair of the West Coast branch of Forest & Bird and a key member of the Coast Road Resilience Group.
- We are very fortunate to have Craig Potton MNZM, conservationist, environmentalist and photographer among his many attributes, as our Patron. Dr Scott Freeman, Senior Biodiversity Ranger at DOC in Westport and past Trustee, shares those attributes and we are very appreciative of Scott as our Advisory Trustee.
- Since the Trust was founded in 2006, our relationship with DOC staff across the region, across biodiversity, community and management, has gone from strength to strength. The trust is very grateful for the very positive, reciprocal and constructive relationship as well as collaboration from time to time. Although not optimistic at present, we remain hopeful that they will once again be in a position to support the trust's work with grants in the not too distant future.

Huge thanks to our Trust Team:

Patron
Craig Potton MNZM

Trustees
Robin Long (Chair)
Jill Cotton
Margaret Costello
Martin Abel
Suzanne Hills
Deborah Carden
Dr Scott Freeman (Advisory Trustee, DOC)

Manager Inger Perkins
Accounts Karen Grant
Rangers Lucy Waller (Ranger and Education/Awareness Ranger), Tawaki Rangers: Catherine Stewart, Sarah Kivi
Scientist Dr Thomas Mattern

Website and IT services
Leon Dalziel of Baby-e Website Design
James Kim

Special thanks to our scientist and scientific advisors:

When the Trust's first Chair and ever present scientist, Kerry-Jayne Wilson MNZM, died in March 2022, the Trust could have been left floundering. However, in addition to an experienced and committed team, we were immensely fortunate that Kerry-Jayne's frequent penguin science collaborator, Dr Thomas Mattern, kindly agreed to support, guide and work with the Trust.

Thomas worked with Kerry-Jane to research and then publish a state of the nations paper, summarising the research priorities of the six penguins in the New Zealand region.

Thomas is guiding us to fine tune our work programmes for maximum efficiency and clear and valuable data collection and interpretation. He is supporting the implementation of new work programmes at our new main study site and connecting us to wider science projects where our data will be integral. Such research, to be undertaken by Master's student Patrick Daugherty, will also investigate the links between the breeding success and foraging study data we collect and the ever changing marine parameters.

We are indebted to Thomas and enormously grateful.

Our grateful thanks also go to Dr Philippa Agnew at the Oamaru Blue Penguin Colony. Philippa has led the research programme there for many years, driving and supporting little penguin / kororā science. Our Ranger, Lucy Waller, is our second ranger to have benefited from training from Philippa and her team, and we are very grateful to her and environment team leader, Henry Elsom, for their ongoing support and guidance.

Enormous thanks to our sponsors and donors:

We are enormously grateful for the ongoing support we have received from our sponsors, Supporters (Annual Supporters are those who donate a minimum of and often far more than $50 a year plus a few Supporters for Life (minimum $500 donation)), other donors, and those who have provided in-kind support for the financial year to the end of March 2024.

With funding harder to come by and taking up more time, it is only with their generous assistance, plus that of volunteers, that we can carry on our operation – conservation projects that are critical to ensuring that penguins and other threatened seabirds in our region thrive.

Huge thanks to the following wonderful individuals and organisations and to others who wish to remain anonymous, or we may have missed, for their marvellous generosity, encouragement and confidence in what we do.

Generous providers of grants	Superb Supporters	Other Fabulous Donors	Very Special Mentions
West Coast Community Trust	Alice Shanks	Pension Insurance Corporation PLC	Matt Charteris & Annabel Gossett
Wellington Zoo Trust	Alun Hassall	Waka Kotahi NZTA	Catherine Stewart & Robin Long
The Lion Foundation	Amy Wilson	Annie's Legacy	Luisa Salis-Soglio
Sargood Bequest	Annie Inwood	Westland Milk Products	WestReef Services
Bill Blackadder Trust	Brenda Kaye	Tumbleweed Tees	Chris Pullen
Rotary Lend a Hand	Briar Charmley	Richard Young - New Zealand Photography Workshops	Pancake Rocks Café
	Carolyn Hewlett	Meena Janthakun – NZ Craft	Jeanette Goode
Supporters for Life	Catherine van Paassen	Karla Martin – Orderly Stitch	Julie Leighton
Anna McKay – Woodpecker Bay Baches	Christian Masser	Elizabeth Meaclem – Sunset Lodge	Cassie Mealey
Christine Robertson	Christine Robertson	Tash Goodwin – Glacier Valley Eco Tours	Tracy Johnston-Coates and family and friends
Chuck Theriault and Elysa Dennett	Christine Stet		Jase Blair
Daniel Beetham - Woodpecker Bay Baches	Dorte Herholdt Silver	Amy Wolfe	Wilderness Gallery – Hokitika
Deborah Carden	Fung Lai	Andrew Pester	Fung Lai
Haydon Ditchburn	Gemma Torr	Arna McAvoy	Hokitika Glass Studio
Jack & Kay Davidson	Jane Marshall	Craig Schwitzer	Sarah Griffiths
Jan Macdonald & Stephen Roberts	Jayne Blakemore	Eve Maxwell	James Kim
Jessica Inglefield	Karen Grant	Frida Inta	
Dr Jonathon Clearwater	Lore Leseberg	Grace and Frank Morgan	**Donation Box Hosts**
Kim & Stu Free, Canterbury Petfoods	Lyn & Alan Stobie	Ian Jex	DOC Punakaiki Visitor Centre
Luke & Taylor – Choose Sarcasm	Michael Humphries	J A Cooper	J's Café - Westport
Maria Valls	Mike Hay	Judith Mendelsohn	Westport New World
Mark Davies	Natasha Meynell	M J Mathews	Hokitika Craft Gallery
Mark Hangar – Nature Quest	Nicky & 'Peng' Armstrong	Maxine Kissling	Hokitika Glass Studio
Monique Kors	Rohan Wanigasekera	N M Smith	Woodpecker Bay Bach
Nic Neame - Bella Vista Greymouth	Ruth Killman	Phyllis & Mike Wells	Craig Potton Gallery
Nicholas George	Shaun Tipson	Robert Sheridan	Kiwi Centre - Hokitika
Peter Wall	Soumya Vega	Sylvain Hosatte	Photo Corner / Moments in Time - Hokitika
Phil Bones	Susi Luecht		Underworld Adventures - Charleston
Wilderness Lodge Lake Moeraki	Suzanne Hills		Ross Store
	Valerie Pollard		
	Yuki Yonezawa		