

Annual Report

2025–2026

West Coast Penguin Trust

Contents



PAGE 01
Message from the Trustees

PAGE 02
Little Penguin | Kororā monitoring

PAGE 05
Trapping to protect seabird colonies

PAGE 06
Penguin Protection Fences

PAGE 08
Foraging study – GPS tags for Kororā

PAGE 11
Fiordland Crested Penguins | Tawaki

PAGE 14
Westland Petrels | Tāiko

PAGE 14
Education

PAGE 16
Awareness and advocacy

PAGE 18
Special thanks





Message from the Trustees

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.

The 2025-26 year tested our little penguins or kororā, with a challenging breeding season driven by what appears to be environmental stress at sea, while our tawaki had a much steadier year. Once again this has underlined why our long-term monitoring matters: without it, the pressures our penguins are facing offshore would remain invisible. We are grateful, as ever, to our scientist, Dr Thomas Mattern for his guidance, to our rangers and volunteers for their dedication in sometimes difficult conditions, and to our funders and supporters for enabling this work to continue.

Despite challenges for penguins themselves, for our field work, for fundraising, and for conservation generally, we are proud to still be going strong after 20 years. The Trust was founded in October 2006 and has grown from small beginnings, first working to understand and then address threats to little penguins or kororā. Our research and practical projects have become more focussed as we continue to learn more about the threats to both West Coast penguins, kororā and tawaki, Fiordland crested penguins. We have a strong and valued education programme and our advocacy continues to be an important part of our work, whether for the risk from a ship wreck to risk from proposed changes to legislation.

We look forward to a greater understanding of the conservation situation for kororā in the coming year, and we will continue to respond to opportunities and threats to West Coast penguins and other threatened seabirds.

As we prepare this report, it is disappointing but not unexpected to note that the avian influenza virus H5N1 has just been detected in New Zealand for the first time. Preparation has been key and we have been sharing advice from MPI and DOC to ensure that everyone understands the situation including the risk to sea birds, to pets, to poultry etc; the need to keep your distance and do not touch dead or sick seabirds and marine mammals; and when and how to report concerns.

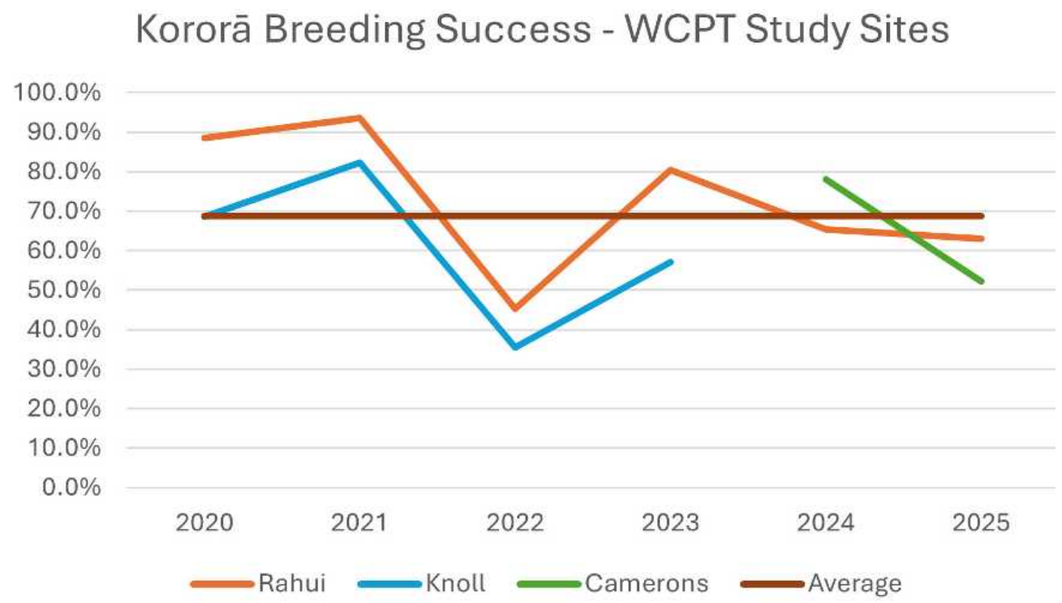
Thank you, with appreciation for all your help and support.

Trustees
West Coast Penguin Trust
AUGUST 2026

Little Penguin | Kororā monitoring

2025 marked the second season of monitoring at our primary study site near Greymouth (Camerons), with 23 active nests compared to 22 in 2024.





Our foraging study began showing unusual patterns during egg incubation. Tracked birds stayed at sea for up to 17 days instead of the usual 5-7 days, and travelled extraordinary distances offshore — up to 120km, compared with a typical range of 25-30km.

By the end of the season there were more nest failures at Camerons (five, compared with two the previous year) and more nests fledging a single chick rather than two.

Overall breeding success at the Camerons study site fell from 76% in 2024 to 52% in 2025, with 23 chicks fledged compared with 32 the previous year — well below our average of 69% across study colonies in previous years.

No signs of predation were recorded; the evidence points instead to environmental stress, most likely reduced prey availability linked to a weak La Niña event and associated marine warming.

At our second, long-running study site at Rahui, Charleston (data generously shared by Matt Charteris and his family since 2008), breeding success also declined for the 2024 and 2025 seasons, though the pattern was not identical to Camerons — confirming Dr Thomas Mattern's advice that breeding data cannot be extrapolated from one colony to another.

Elsewhere, the picture was more mixed: our former Charleston study site and Joyce Bay both saw breeding success increase, with Joyce Bay in particular rebounding strongly — 15 active nests found compared with only seven in 2024.

31 kororā were microchipped at the study site this season, bringing the total to 77 across two seasons. This is key to building a demographic dataset that, alongside breeding success and foraging data, will help us understand survival rates, colony growth or decline, and links to changing marine conditions.

Volunteer-run trapping started many years ago by the Guardians of Paroa Taramakau Coastal Area Trust continues around the Camerons colony. One stoat was caught this season just three metres from an active penguin nest, a reminder that land-based predators remain a threat even where numbers are currently low.

We took an opportunity to do some survey work around Cape Foulwind, Punakaiki and Hokitika with the help of penguin conservation dog, Miro, and her handler, ecologist Joanna Sim. Dogs are far better designed to find penguin nests and Miro did a great job, giving us a clearer idea of penguin nest locations in these areas.

Despite the tough season, kororā continued to show real resilience, with many parents successfully raising chicks despite difficult foraging conditions. For the 2026 season, priorities include continuing the foraging study and microchipping programme, upgrading nest boxes, and reviewing our approach to monitoring smaller Buller colonies to make the best use of limited resources.

We thank our volunteers working with Ranger Lucy Waller who again stepped up to assist at all hours of day and night and in all weathers, to maintain our monitoring programme – Therese Walker, Grace Lockington, Maria Lockington and Sharon Macleod; you are legends.



HOKITIKA PENGUIN SURVEY WITH CONSERVATION DOG MIRO

Trapping to protect seabird colonies

Trapping has continued over the last year with 21 traps on the coastline opposite Seal Island and 23 on the north head at Tauranga Bay, Cape Foulwind.

The Cape Foulwind traps are maintained 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 that attempt to breed on the mainland in this area. We are very grateful to Trustee Margaret Costello, husband Jim and volunteer Hayden Chalmers for maintaining these traps (other volunteers would be welcome!).

Seal Island, an island other than at low tide a few kilometres north of Punakaiki, is home to spotted shags and sooty shearwaters. Little penguins / kororā also nest in this area, protected from the highway by a section of our penguin protection fence. While there are rats and mice on the island now, our predator control project here is aimed at keeping the island weasel and stoat free. Marg with Jim's help have maintained the traps here for nine years, a wonderful effort and we can't thank them enough for quietly getting on with this.

The traps are a mixture of DOC 200s and 180s in single wooden boxes, baited usually with salmon oil on ceramic cylinders but occasionally with dried rabbit meat at the Seal Island traps. Those traps have been checked on average every 3 weeks, and the ones at Tauranga Bay monthly.

The catches for the last 12 months have been: Seal Island 54 rats, 1 stoat, 2 weasels and Tauranga Bay 50 rats, 1 weasel, 1 hedgehog. While it is satisfying to be catching these pests it is difficult to judge what effect the catches may have had on nearby breeding seabirds, but we are seeing the numbers of mustelids decline over the years, and believe the effort remains worthwhile.

The Trust has been attempting to gain evidence for the failure of sooty shearwater / tītī nests on the headland at the north end of Tauranga Bay. We believe it is likely to be weka, taking chicks on hatching, and have deployed trail cameras to confirm this theory. Weka are known to predate seabird chicks in other parts of the country, and our cameras showed them poking around and into burrows. Sadly, one gulp and the evidence would be gone, so we assume weka, a natural predator, will be responsible, and we'll do our best to keep introduced predators in this area under control.

Penguin Protection Fences

Our penguin protection fences have been erected where penguins were being killed in high numbers on State Highway 6 — north of Hokitika, north and south of Punakaiki, and near Seal Island. They continue to keep penguins safely off the highway, though they require ongoing maintenance against rapid vegetation growth, other damage and sadly occasional vandalism.



VOLUNTEERS CLEARING VEGETATION ALONG PENGUIN FENCELINE

Volunteers spent several hours clearing flax and vegetation from the main fence along Woodpecker Bay, north of Punakaiki — thank you to Fiona, Jony, Reef, Katrina, Mandy, Marty, Teresa and Deb. Volunteers Karen Hitchcock, of the Fitzherbert Court Motel in Hokitika, and Natassja Savidge have helped keep weeds at bay along the Hokitika fence; thank you both.

A donation from Pub Charity meant that we could bring in fencer John Steele, who built the Hokitika fence, to do some repairs where some of the worst and woodiest weeds had broken wires. We are very grateful to Westland Milk Products for their long-standing support of the Hokitika penguin protection fence and our penguin conservation efforts more generally.



Foraging study – GPS tags for Kororā

Tiny dataloggers are carefully attached to little penguins / kororā to help us understand their foraging behaviour during both egg incubation and chick guard stages. The 2025 season revealed clear signs of foraging stress in kororā during the egg incubation period, an important and alarming finding for the study.



KORORĀ WITH LOGGER ON NEW EGG IN NEST BOX

We will be working with generous penguin scientists to analyse this data and relate it to marine conditions, and our thanks also go to the Brian Mason Trust and the Lottery Environment & Heritage Fund for their support of this study.



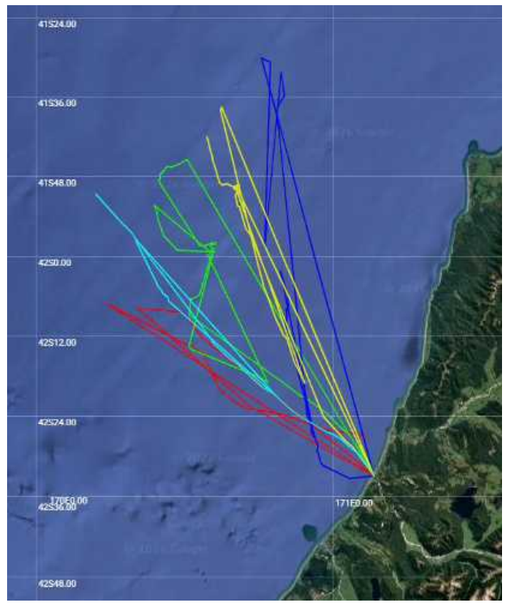
Five tracking datasets were collected from kororā at the study colony during egg incubation in August and September 2025, using loggers that record dives and routes taken.

Tracked birds travelled far further than in previous years — one bird reached a maximum home range of over 120km, against a typical 25-30km — and stayed at sea for 17 days rather than the expected 5-7 days.

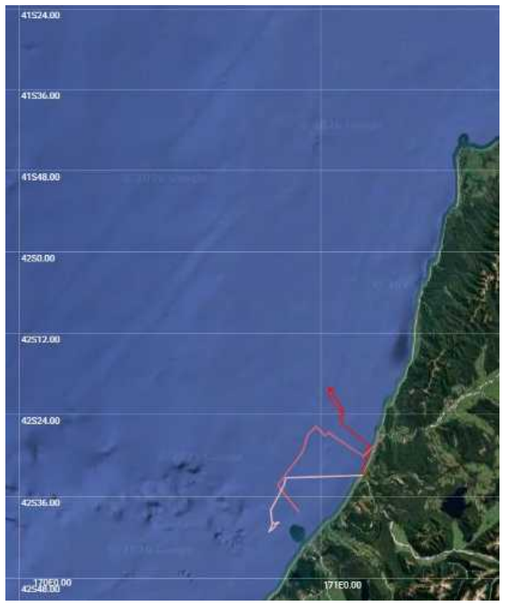
Average dive depth during this period was a shallow 3.6m, but dives (including surface time) were long, averaging 227 metres. Diving efficiency was higher than in 2024 but below the site average, consistent with birds working harder to find food. Difficult foraging conditions during incubation were more clearly indicated by the extreme distances of the foraging trips.

The likely driver of the challenging conditions was reduced prey availability, associated with marine heatwave conditions and a weak La Niña event through 2025 — warmer surface water can push prey fish deeper or further out, beyond the reach of the world's smallest penguin.

During the subsequent chick guard stage, foraging trips were much shorter, though some birds displayed a new pattern of heading south along the coast rather than straight out to sea — one individual travelled over 35km from Karoro Beach to the Hokitika River mouth, possibly seeking prey associated with the higher nutrient loads found near river mouths.

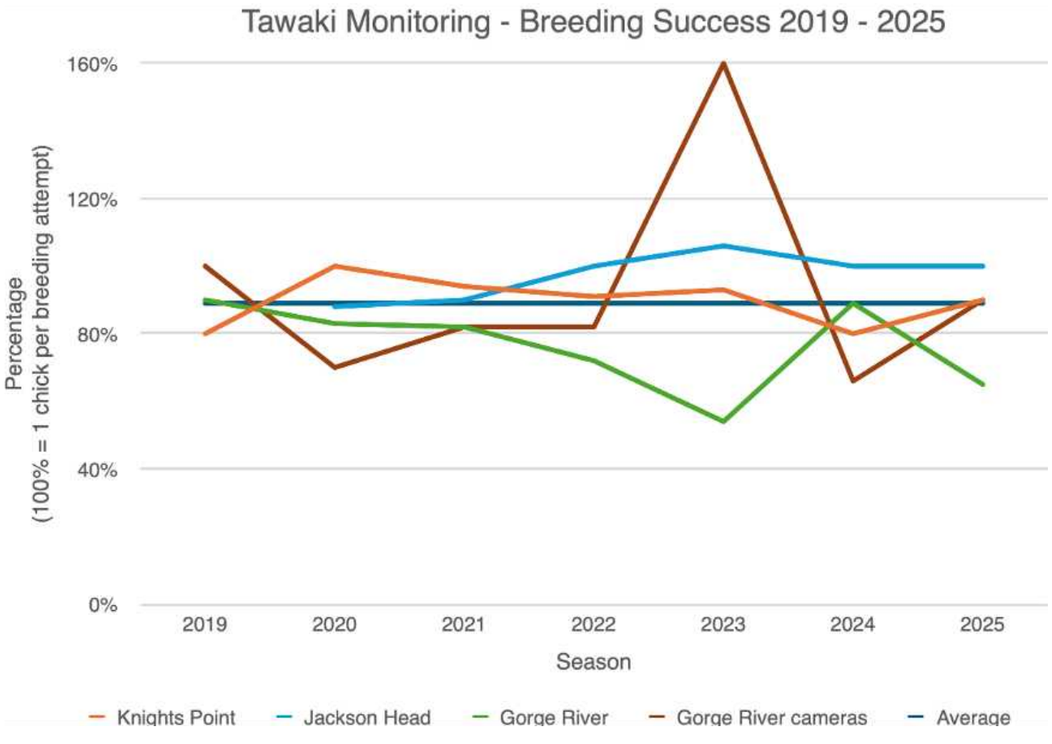


INCUBATION
approx scale 10 km



GUARD STAGE
approx scale 10 km





Fiordland Crested Penguins | Tawaki

Tawaki had a much steadier season than kororā in 2025, with encouraging results across our South Westland monitoring sites.

At our key long-term study site, Gorge River (monitored since 2014 by Tawaki Rangers Robin Long and Catherine Stewart), the 10 camera-monitored nests recorded a 90% breeding success rate — a significant improvement on 2024's 66%, and close to the 92% average recorded there since 2019. The wider, non-camera-monitored sample of 24 nests recorded a lower and less certain 65% success rate, reflecting the difficulty of confirming nest outcomes without cameras.

A small number of healthy chicks were found dead with no sign of predation, including two chicks lost from one particularly promising two-chick nest at Gorge River, unfortunately after the camera failed. The cause remains unexplained, with possible causes including parent death or abandonment. The more usual cause of death of the second smaller chick, except when food is abundant, is competition for food from the larger sibling.

Encouragingly, no stoats were recorded on any nest or baited monitoring cameras this season, which we take as a sign of the success of DOC's landscape-scale predator control work earlier in 2025 — stoats are a known major threat to tawaki eggs and chicks.

At Jackson Head, 20 breeding attempts from 22 active nests were on track to fledge 20 chicks — 100% breeding success, repeating 2024's result and continuing a strong two-year run (97% average since 2020).

At a colony near Knights Point, 10 breeding attempts produced 9 fledged chicks, a 90% success rate and a 10% improvement on 2024.

For 2026, we're aiming to better establish egg-laying timing so that chick-guard stage nest checks can happen later, giving more confident chick survival data, and we'll continue camera monitoring for both breeding success and predator presence at Gorge River.

We remain enormously grateful for the ongoing support of the Wellington Zoo Trust for this monitoring programme.

Westland Petrels | tāiko

Over the years, the Trust has participated in and supported research to understand and improve the conservation of Westland petrels.



KERRY-JAYNE WILSON BURROW MONITORING

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. In recent years, our role has shifted to being an advocate, speaking up for tāiko and their habitat through various RMA and other processes, and referencing Kerry-Jayne's research.



WESTLAND PETREL AND CHICK

Education

Our education programme has been very active, with a good chunk of the work delivered through hands-on field collaboration with teachers and students who then take their insider knowledge and experience back to their classrooms.

Our fabulous volunteers include a primary school teacher with long-standing involvement in school projects, a secondary biology teacher already connected with the Trust's monitoring and trapping work, and a Level 3 biology student with a strong interest in science. Each has been able to use their field experience to enrich classroom learning, support conservation projects, and raise awareness about penguin protection within schools and community networks.

School and youth group engagement has also continued across the region. St Mary's has been involved in nest box projects, education sessions, and beach visits; John Paul II has received support for biology classes and a dissection class; Westland High School's conservation group has built nest boxes; and St Canice's has received classroom and remote support, resources, and presentations. Other schools we are working with are Blackball, Paroa, St Patrick's, Ross and Barrytown and we look forward to supporting them and their students in the coming months. Bespoke education resources were also created for Girl Guides, Brownies, Scouts, and Cubs, with beach visits and follow-up Q&A helping connect young people directly with their local penguin habitat and conservation issues.

Education Ranger, Lucy Waller, continues to support schools as they include penguins in their classroom activities and as they adapt to curriculum changes, particularly where local curriculum links have shifted. Our educational resource remains in demand by schools, community groups, and the public across New Zealand, and there is potential future support from the Global Penguin Society in association with National Geographic for developing and producing new resources. Overall, the programme is broadening its impact by combining field science, school partnerships, resource sharing, and community-based conservation education.



LEARNING ABOUT KORORĀ

Awareness and advocacy

Through our website, Facebook page, newsletter and public talks, we continue to raise awareness of penguins and other threatened seabirds, the challenges they face, and how people can help.



Trust Manager Inger Perkins and Tawaki Ranger Catherine Stewart gave a public talk at the Westland District Library in Hokitika, during which local fossil collector Harry Jensen shared remarkable finds of ancient penguin bones from the West Coast, including a wing bone potentially representing a new-to-science species related to *Pachydyptes ponderosus* (c. 32-34 million years old). It was a great reminder of how deep the West Coast's connection to penguins runs. (Photo of penguin fossil kindly shared by Harry Jensen).

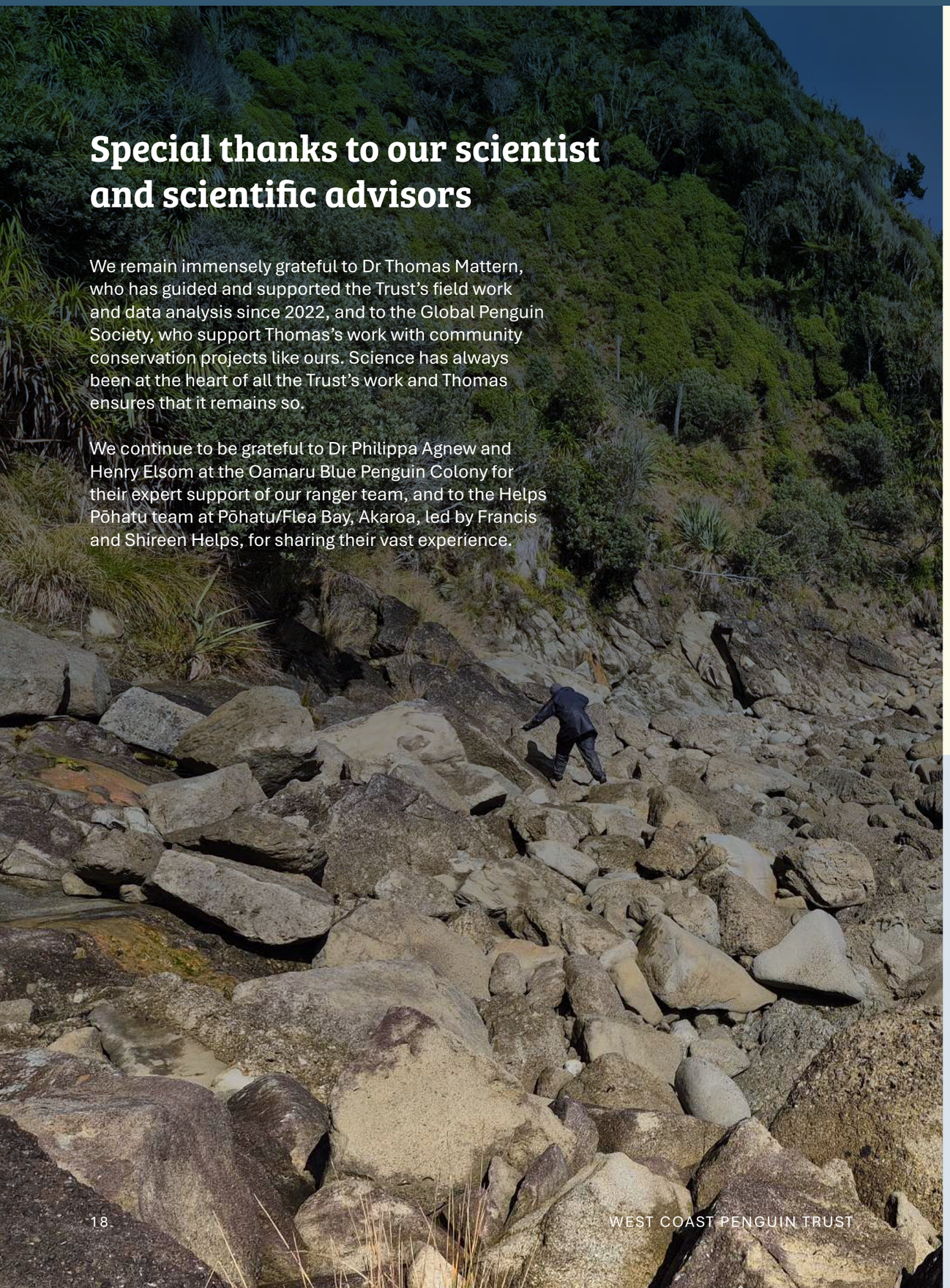
In October 2025, the West Coast Wildlife Centre in Franz Josef opened its new Ambassador Kororā Encounter, giving visitors the chance to meet kororā living out their lives in care after injuries that would have prevented their survival in the wild. The Trust's work is featured on interpretive panels at the new centre, and we were honoured to attend the official opening, which was led by a pōwhiri from Te Rūnanga o Makaawhio and included DOC, Development West Coast and West Coast-Tasman MP Maureen Pugh.

We published an in-depth explainer on ENSO — the El Niño Southern Oscillation — and how differently it affects kororā and tawaki, drawing on our own monitoring data going back to the 2015 El Niño and the 2022 La Niña marine heatwave, to help supporters understand why breeding success varies so much year to year.

In recent weeks, the Trust submitted on the Conservation Amendment Bill 2026 and the Proposed National Conservation Policy Statement 2026, alarmed at the risk to conservation that was being proposed. The risk is that all conservation values, including threatened species and habitat currently a top priority for DOC under the Conservation Act, could be replaced by or somehow equated to economic priorities. We hope and trust that common sense will prevail and that conservation will remain the priority for the amended Conservation Act.

As we prepare our Annual Report, the first three cases of avian influenza, H5N1, have been detected in New Zealand. The Trust has been prepared for at least four years and remains in close contact with DOC to ensure our understanding of the situation is up to date. We not only ensure that our field work is managed appropriately but also that we share clear messages with the West Coast community, through news and social media.

We are very grateful for ongoing fundraising efforts by the team at the West Coast Wildlife Centre on our behalf.



Special thanks to our scientist and scientific advisors

We remain immensely grateful to Dr Thomas Mattern, who has guided and supported the Trust's field work and data analysis since 2022, and to the Global Penguin Society, who support Thomas's work with community conservation projects like ours. Science has always been at the heart of all the Trust's work and Thomas ensures that it remains so.

We continue to be grateful to Dr Philippa Agnew and Henry Elsom at the Oamaru Blue Penguin Colony for their expert support of our ranger team, and to the Helps Pōhatu team at Pōhatu/Flea Bay, Akaroa, led by Francis and Shireen Helps, for sharing their vast experience.

Enormous thanks to our fabulous sponsors and donors

Supporters for Life

Anna McKay

Anne Saunders and Gerry McSweeney

Brittney Macdonald

Chris Pullen

Christine Robertson

Chuck Theriault and Elysa Dennett

Daniel Beetham

Deborah Carden

Haydon Ditchburn

Jack & Kay Davidson

Jan/Stephen Macdonald/ Roberts

Jessica Inglefield

Jonathon Clearwater

Kim Free

Mark Davies

Mark Hanger

Maria Valls

Monique Kors

Nic Neame

Nicholas George

Nicky & 'Peng' Armstrong

Paul Caffyn

Paul Elwell-Sutton

Phil Bones

Peter and Cathy Wall

Richard Young

Sarah Ayto

Sarah Griffiths

Shaun Tipson

Stefan Ayto

So-Young Park

Taylor Spittle

Taylor Waterman

Superb Supporters

Alun Hassall

Amy Wilson

Annie Inwood

Carolyn Hewlett

Catherine van Paassen

Christian Masser

Christine Stet

Dorte Herholdt Silver

Gemma, Martin and Ashton Torr-Nunn

Jane Marshall

Karen Grant

Kim Free

Holin Davison

Lore Leseberg

Lyn Stobie

Michael Humphries

Mike Hay

Natasha Meynell

Rohan Wanigasekera

Ruth Killman

Susi Luecht

Victoria Halliday

Other Fabulous Donors

Pension Insurance Corporation PLC

Westland Milk Products

Kerry Jeffs – Hokitika Fire Station

WMS Group

Richard Young - NZ Photography Workshops

Tumbleweed Tees

Elizabeth Meaclem – Sunset Lodge

Guardians of Paroa

Taramakau Coastal Area Trust

Kerry-Jayne Wilson bequest

Kia Ora Vancouver

Anthea Ibell

Bernie Calder

Dan Bachmann

Dave Houston

Denise Howard

Design 3D Ltd

Dot Dalziell, Ange van der Laan, Kirsti Douglas

Emily Kerr

Fiona McDonald

Forest & Bird

Glacier Valley Eco Tours

Gary Jellie

Halall Embaye

Jacqui Allen

Jan Nicholson - Athol Emporium

Jenny Bostock

Jenny Greene

Juliet Adams

Lesley Webb

Lucy Howell

Madeleine Roberts

Maria Valls

Mark Harris

Michelle Bradshaw

Peter Turner

Phyllis & Mike Wells

Roshan Gurmeet Singh

Sam McCarthy

Sarah Kessell

Sung Tak Leung

Zoe Hart

Very Special Mentions

Matt Charteris & Annabel Gossett

Catherine Stewart & Robin Long

Luisa Salis-Soglio

WestReef Services & Rota Carroll

Chris Pullen

Pancake Rocks Café

Jeanette Goode

Julie Leighton

Cassie Mealey

Tracy Johnston-Coates and family

Jase Blair

Wilderness Gallery – Hokitika

Hokitika Glass Studio

Sarah Griffiths

Fulton Hogan

Donation Box Hosts

DOC Punakaiki Visitor Centre

J's Café - Westport

Westport New World

Hokitika Craft Gallery

Hokitika Glass Studio

Ross Store

Woodpecker Bay Bach

Craig Potton Gallery

Kiwi Centre - Hokitika

Photo Corner / Moments in Time

Underworld Adventures - Charleston

Gentle Annie Accommodation

Generous providers of grants

West Coast Community Trust

Wellington Zoo Trust

Sargood Bequest

Lottery Environment & Heritage Fund

Pub Charity

Brian Mason Trust

Di Buchan Environmental Trust

The Lion Foundation



THANK YOU, THANK YOU, TO ALL OF YOU!

West Coast Penguin Trust Board and beyond

We are fortunate to have a board of Trustees with great depth and breadth of conservation and community experience. Deborah Carden, Jill Cotton, Margaret Costello, Robin Long, Martin Abel and Chris Woolmore each bring 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.

We continue to be honoured to have Craig Potton MNZM, conservationist, environmentalist and photographer, as our Patron, and Dr Scott Freeman, Senior Biodiversity Ranger at DOC in Westport and past Trustee, as our Advisory Trustee.

Since the Trust was founded in 2006, our relationship with DOC rangers across the region has gone from strength to strength and continues to be valued enormously.

On 16th October 2026, the Trust celebrates the 20th anniversary of its founding. From small beginnings and a focus on little blue penguins, kororā, we have grown to encompass both West Coast penguins and in fact all other threatened seabirds and their habitat across the region.

Monitoring of breeding success, foraging activity, predators and mortality has given us important knowledge to build upon, including incorporating it into a successful education programme and driving the installation of our penguin protection fences.

We have been growing our research over the past three years and continue to do so. This will give us even greater understanding of the status of penguins as well as threats to them, including from climate related marine conditions. All of this ensures that our education programme and advocacy is as accurate and up to date as possible.

Two new projects working with other penguin scientists could be added to our 2026 season's work, already very full, and the whole season's story will be shared in next year's annual report.

Huge thanks to our Trust Team

Trust Team

Martin Abel
Deborah Carden
Margaret Costello
Jill Cotton
Robin Long
Chris Woolmore

The rest of the team

MANAGER: Inger Perkins
ACCOUNTS: Karen Grant
RANGER: Lucy Waller (Ranger and Education Ranger)
TAWAKI RANGER: Catherine Stewart
SCIENTIST: Dr Thomas Mattern
ADVISORY TRUSTEE: Dr Scott Freeman
DESIGNER & MEDIA VOLUNTEER: Erin Dailey

WEBSITE, IT SERVICES & SUPPORT (VOLUNTEERED & DONATED):
Leon Dalziel (Baby-e Website Design), James Kim, Natassja Savidge, Andy Wright (West Coast Technology Education Trust)

PENGUIN STUDY VOLUNTEERS:
Therese Walker, Maria Lockington, Grace Lockington, Sharon McLeod, Melissa McLuskie

PENGUIN FENCE VOLUNTEERS:
Pahautane – Fiona, Jony, Reef, Katrina, Mandy, Marty, Teresa and Deb
Hokitika – Natassja and Karen

TRAPPING VOLUNTEERS:
Margaret and Jim Costello, Hayden Chalmers, Therese Walker

Thank you from the West Coast Penguin Trust team



(LEFT TO RIGHT) Inger Perkins, Martin Abel, Margaret Costello, Deborah Carden, Jill Cotton, Karen Grant, Chris Woolmore

INSERTS: Lucy Waller, Catherine Stewart, Robin Long

West Coast Penguin Trust



West Coast
Penguin Trust