

Just seven chicks survived breeding season

This is the first in a series of articles giving insights into the lives of some of the interesting and iconic birds commonly seen in and around our local harbours and beaches. Each species habitat requirements, their seasonal movements, factors threatening their continued presence here in Whangamatā and their current conservation status will be covered. Birds featured will include NZ dotterel, banded dotterel, banded rail, oystercatchers, pied stilt, bar-tailed godwit, bittern, fernbird, royal spoonbill and various gulls, terns, shags and herons.

Hopefully the series will result in a better understanding of each species and the threats they face locally. Birds are a constant presence and visual component in all our lives, whether they be in our gardens, or on our roads, rivers, beaches, lakes, bush areas, coastal seas, etc.

The first species to be covered in this series is the northern NZ dotterel. This bird was teetering on the edge of extinction up until their plight was recognised in the late 1980's and conservation action initiated. At that time their population was restricted to beaches in Northland, Auckland, Waikato and the Bay of Plenty. They numbered around 800 birds and were rapidly declining. By 2011, due to the introduction of predator controls and nest protection measures, they had increased to around 2500. They have now recolonised former beach habitats as far south as the Wairarapa on the East Coast, including a number of off-shore islands and Taranaki in the West. Their Conservation Status as determined by the Department of Conservation is At Risk - Relict, a vulnerable endemic species.

The Whangamatā population of breeding birds currently numbers around 18 pairs. During the winter months large groups of dotterel totalling around 115 birds, gather



Adult NZ dotterel. Photo: John Adams

at various Whangamatā harbour, estuarine and beach sites. Many of these come here from neighbouring beaches. They flock together for mutual protection, to feed, rest and recover from their breeding season exertions. It is also the time when they moult and grow new feathers, and for some it is the time to socialise and establish new partnerships.

Their nest is a simple shallow scraped bowl on open sandy foredune sites, usually above the reach of high-tide wave surges and on the seaward side of the more densely vegetated higher dunes. These small, trusting and endearing birds are very protective of their nests. They will establish territories around them which they defend whenever they are approached by other birds, people, dogs and any native or introduced predators. They do this by first trying to attract the intruders away by putting on broken wing displays or charging at them and aggressively making loud distress calls.

The dotterels main native predators are harrier hawks, black-backed and red-billed gulls, and their introduced predators include cats, dogs, stoats, ferrets, weasels, hedgehogs, and rats. Adult dotterels, their chicks and eggs are all targeted by most of these predators.

Sadly, in the past 3 breeding seasons, the numbers of pairs successfully raising chicks through to fledging (flying) age at Whangamatā Beach has declined significantly, despite the best conservation efforts of our 'volunteer minders'. Nest monitoring over the past 2 years has revealed only 13 eggs hatched successfully from 35 laid in the 2023/24 breeding season, with only 4 chicks surviving to flying stage. This last breeding season only 13 chicks hatched from the 51 eggs laid, and just 7 survived to the flying stage. It seems nest desertions due to human and dog disturbances are the main cause for most of these egg and chick losses.

We currently have a small group of volunteers in Whangamatā and another in the Onemana/Opoutere areas who have taken on the responsibility of looking after their beach populations of NZ dotterels. Their activities include locating, signposting and fencing-off nesting sites, predator controls, and when necessary moving nests out of reach of rogue waves during extreme high-tide storm events.

What can you do to assist the continued presence of these birds on our beaches:

1. When exercising your dogs on the beach during the breeding season,

keep them under close control, at all times and on leads whenever in the vicinity of nesting or roosting dotterels.

2. Try to avoid walking your dogs along the beach during high tide periods and keep away, as far as possible, from the base of the foredunes.

3. Familiarise yourselves with the current local dog by-laws, respect and follow them.

If you observe other people breaking them, report their actions as soon as possible to the local TCDC dog ranger and the DoC.

4. When you and your children are walking, playing or just laying around sunbathing at the beach, do so at least 15-20m away from known nest sites, whether or not they have been fenced off. Avoid the temptation to seek a closer look at the nest as this inevitably results in the incubating bird being disturbed off the nest.

5. During non-breeding periods each year, from March through to August, large groups of dotterels and other shore and sea birds gather together on our harbour, estuaries and beaches to rest and recover from their feeding efforts. They generally crowd closely together during high tide periods and any disturbance of them should be avoided if at all possible.

6. For those people living close to beaches and the harbour perimeters, reduce the opportunity for your pet cats and dogs to roam freely from your properties. Numbers of nests, eggs and chicks are destroyed each year from such occurrences.

7. Add your voices to those seeking increased dog control by-laws and law enforcement on our beaches and the provision of alternative dedicated dog exercise areas.

– John Adams