



Welcome to Issue 31 of the newsletter of Awhitu Peninsula Landcare.

As we reach the end of another year we say thank you to all those who have 'cared for the land' - released a struggling seedling or two; planted a tree or five; removed a possum or ten; destroyed invasive weeds; cleared rubbish from a beach or roadside; nurtured a wetland.

Perhaps taught young ones the importance of environmental care. Our country

is blessed with incredible natural values, but much is under threat - especially our waterways - and every action we take, however small it may seem, is important. Many hands really do make a difference.

*"A true conservationist is a man who knows that the world is not given by his fathers, but borrowed from his children" - John Madison*

## Take care on our beaches



## Our links to the Galaxy!



Left: Think twice before killing an eel - after 25 years of growing, that big one could be just about ready to start its 1500km journey to breed, and our endemic longfin eels are in decline.

to their freshwater habitats - their distribution depends on how far upstream they are able to move. Their habitat is shrinking as wetlands are drained, streamside vegetation removed and barriers to fish passage placed in waterways.

Some species such as eels and some of the whitebait species do have extraordinary climbing abilities. These fish climb mostly when small, moving up the wet margins and using their fins to hold on by surface adhesion.

The highlight of our field trip was when Paul climbed down into the stream to reveal what his traps had caught overnight. And what a find it was, much more than any of us expected - inanga, whitebait, banded kokopu, longfin eels, redbfin bullies, koura (freshwater crayfish) and freshwater shrimp.

The kids were thrilled and the adults looked pretty impressed too - especially by the 1m+ longfin eels - an impressive endemic species which migrates to marine trenches off Tonga to spawn, and can live to 70 years.

The great local 'catch' was a testament to the health of the Kauritutahi Stream where it runs across the Millar property. David and Kathy's splendid streamside planting project has resulted in unmistakable benefits to the ecosystem. Like the miners' canary, the types of fish and invertebrates that live in a stream are a true indicator of a healthy environment.

Oh - and the link to the Milky Way? NZ's largest group of freshwater fish has 29 species including inanga, kokopu, koaro. They are from the ancient, Gondwana-distributed family Galaxiidae - so named because of the clusters of golden or silvery star-like patterns on their scaleless bodies - perfect camouflage in dappled light.

Below: Paul displays a 'catch' of koura and banded kokopu. Inset: It was a relief to find koura didn't bite...

Who could imagine there is a direct link between the Milky Way and our native freshwater fish? Or that fish can climb? These were just a couple of the fascinating things we learnt during our field trip on a runoff property belonging to David and Kathy Millar. Over the past eight years, David and Kathy have done extensive revegetation work alongside the Kauritutahi Stream - fencing it off and planting the margins with thousands of native plants, creating the sheltered, dappled light environment favoured by our native fish.

Our guide for the field trip was Paul Woodard, a passionate freshwater fish expert, whose company is called - Afishionado!

New Zealand has over 35 native fish species, yet most of us would be hard pressed to list more than a couple (no, trout are NOT native!). People are astounded to learn that 'whitebait' are the juveniles of five native species, including some that are threatened.

The greatest diversity of native fish occurs in small streams such as Kauritutahi - many of them no more than a metre wide. So why don't we see them more? Native fish are secretive and nocturnal. Half of our fish species spend time at sea, which means they need unimpeded passage to get



The summer months bring many more visitors to all our beaches on our Peninsula and this puts added stresses on all the plants and animals living around our fragile coast.

Let's consider one very real 'living' example of this:

Many locals and visitors have met the 'Wattle Bay oyster catchers' - a pair of rare Variable Oyster catchers who remain in the area year round. They are true local identities with unique personalities and if anyone can be said to own the beach, they do!

In past years these guys have raised at least five chicks. No mean feat when every December they lay their eggs in incredibly vulnerable places - a scrape in the sand, often on the beach spit just above spring high tide mark - and those who frequent the area watch in horror as bikes and vehicles

inevitably do their damage. Sometimes the pair re-lay after eggs have been destroyed but in reality these guys are fighting insurmountable odds against human carelessness, and recently they have been losing the battle.

Oyster catchers mate for life and can live up to 30 years - they deserve our respect. Wattle Bay is their home. Please, please think twice before driving on a beach or letting your dog loose this summer.

You can do your part in

safeguarding our defenceless flora and fauna by following a few simple guidelines:

- KEEP OFF THE DUNES!
- Keep to access ways, respect fences and signs
- Walk, don't drive, it's so much better for you!
- Keep your dog under control
- No fires on the beach or reserves.

*Pictured above: The Wattle Bay oyster catchers at home - their usual nesting site and (inset) their eggs*

## Rewards are of benefit to all!

Peninsula-wide, the possum control programme - now in its seventh year - is reaping rewards which can be seen and heard by all. More birds of many species are everywhere. Viv Rutherford, long term Awhitu Central resident and for many years official bird species recorder for the Ornithological Society of NZ, says: "Numbers are up-100%. Tui are everywhere - and pigeons. Kaka reported sightings are well up. An interesting increase is that of shorebirds, with the endangered Dotterel back after a long absence, nesting in the remote bays and sandspits; also nesting in these locations are the rare Variable Oyster catchers. The regular counts also indicate more shorebirds - including overwintering Godwits - are on 'our' side of the harbour, year round."

The key to these successes are locals, who stick to the job of regular bait station filling. It is often easier to start something than carry it on, year in year out, but perseverance is the only way we will keep possum numbers down. With 22,000 hectares to cover on the Peninsula, the Awhitu possum programme relies on landowner self-help to succeed. The cost of a bag

of possum bait is now about \$70, so the small rating levy paid by landowners to enable Awhitu to be designated a possum control area (PCA) seems extremely reasonable.

The crucial southern baitline, which effectively enables the Peninsula to become a PCA 'mainland island', has been strengthened with additional bait stations between Karioitahi Beach and Marae O Rehia Road.

This barrier is the cornerstone of our programme and is regularly monitored. Regular Residual Trap Catch (RTC) tests work on two fronts - removing remaining possums, and by indicating

"hotspots" where populations are becoming established.

In upcoming years we hope to make an addition to our existing programme - a new trap powered by compressed carbon dioxide - which fires a lethal bolt to instantly kill possums. Baited with a clove-flavoured paste, this trap works 12 times before needing re-setting, making it particularly suitable for difficult sites. It promises to reduce dependence on poison baits which would be welcomed by all. This is being trialed widely by DOC, and we will start our own trial soon.

**Below: Kaka reported sightings are well up.**

