



Labour Weekend walk over historic Puketapu

Another popular Awhitu Landcare field walk will take place at Labour weekend - Sunday 27th October starting 1pm.

This will be over one of the most historic (for both Maori and European) farms on the Peninsula - 'Puketapu'. Conservation-focused farming by Landcare stalwart David Craig and his wife Antonia culminated in this property winning NZ's top environmental award - a Green Ribbon from the Ministry of the Environment - in 1999.

Their Puketapu homestead was built in the 1860's

and the farm has some of the largest native trees on the Peninsula. We will have a rare opportunity to walk to a waterfall (QEII cove-

nanted), and view extensive wetland plantings, one of which has just been completed this winter. Puketapu is now a beef farm, fin-

ishing steers for the export market. The walk will take at least two hours, over hilly to steep terrain.

Walkers therefore need to be reasonably fit (access for 'rescue' vehicles is not possible), wear sturdy footwear and bring their own water. No dogs please.

Parking available on the farm, which is accessed at the end of Hamilton Road, Awhitu Central.

A gold coin donation towards Landcare projects is appreciated.

Left: Some Puketapu bush has been shut up for 20 years.



New Mustelid initiatives



With the possum control programme moved up a notch, Landcare are now able to increase the focus on mustelids - in our district, ferrets and stoats are the mustelid family members most often sighted.

Ferrets were farmed for fur in RD3; escapees have established populations throughout the peninsula. Occasional road kills suggest considerable populations; reports of dead chickens - often killed and not eaten, but with tell-tale injuries around the head and neck - point to ferrets. Stoats are sometimes seen sinuously crossing country roads; smaller and more secretive than ferrets they are rarely seen in the open. Both species are very efficient killers of birds, baby birds and relish eating eggs, so it is important to target them, along with possums and rats, to assist the survival of our bird populations.

Landcare have purchased extra traps, and our mustelid programme will have two prongs. Firstly, the establishment of a mustelid trapline using DOC 200 traps, in an area of Waipipi where ferrets have been since the fur farming days. The other important part of the programme will be the self-help aspect, with more traps available to loan out to locals who have sighted either ferrets or stoats, or think they may have them on their properties.

Local expert trapper, Martin Robertson, will be assisting us with the programme, and will be starting off with a demonstration of trap baiting and setting, utilising several different types of traps. This will take place at the Landcare nursery, Matakawau Domain, Saturday 19th October, 10am-midday.

All welcome to attend and learn the tricks of catching these wily, destructive little creatures...one of the very few animals who kill for sheer pleasure.

Above: Expert Martin Robertson will demonstrate effective trapping at the workshop.

Possum progress stepped up

Spring is a good time to fill your bait stations, with birds at the peak of nesting activity - so if you have been too busy over winter, now is a perfect time to get on to it.

Bait supplies are available from Landcare for residents of RD3 and RD4 Waiuku - contact Landcare, or Ian McNaughton 235 0851. The broadifacoum bait is also very effective at reducing rat numbers. With reports of big rat populations through autumn/winter, it is valuable to keep on top of these pests which are also very destructive of eggs and baby birds.

Bait stations are also available - if yours are succumbing to old age, or you need a few more for your property - get in touch. If you are not comfortable with using bait and prefer to trap

- we also have a good supply of Timms traps to buy or hire.

Landcare have stepped up the Awhitu possum control programme, recruiting local Peter Shepherd to focus on problem areas in the top end of the Peninsula where there is a lot of difficult-to-access, hilly, bush country - perfect for possums.

We have also been able to add feratex poisoning to our arsenal; this has to be much more carefully monitored than broadifacoum, but it is very useful for bait-shy possums, or "hotspots" where dense populations have established. Residents in areas where we plan to run a feratex line are given plenty of notice, so everyone is aware when and where the programme is running.

Residual trap catch (RTC) tests, which are done regularly to measure the effectiveness of our programme, recently came in at 4% - lowest for two years. Hotspots found are being targeted now.

Professional operators will be running catch traplines soon - property owners will be contacted by contractors before lines are set.

A good eradication programme through Spring should enable us to get down below the magic 4% barrier. Research through the Ark in the Park project in the Waitakere Ranges has found that tui and kereru are particularly susceptible to higher possum numbers; getting below 4% leads to a huge benefit, with far greater numbers hatching and surviving.

The Australasian Bittern - a rare and elusive local

The Australasian bittern, or Matuku, endemic to New Zealand, Australia and New Caledonia, has suffered almost catastrophic losses - it is now on the endangered list.

Here, the destruction of wetland habitat, predators, road kill, power line entanglements, accidental shooting, and a fad for utilising their feathers for fly-fishing, have all contributed to a high attrition rate.

A member of the Heron family, the bittern is partly nocturnal, feeding on fish, eels, frogs, freshwater crayfish and insects.

They are completely dependent on quality wetland habitat, favouring raupo-fringed areas which enable these shy birds to remain undetected.

Their camouflaging plumage, and ability to stand completely still with head and beak vertical, makes spotting the birds extremely difficult; if startled they may take off, which gives a great view of a large and impressive bird. The preferred nesting site is within the raupo margin, with four eggs usually laid, incubated by the female only - the male often has multiple partners.

It is particularly difficult to monitor bittern populations. The current most effective method is the recording of the

"booming" calls of the male bittern, which can be heard through the breeding season - September through December, with dawn and dusk the best times for hearing these calls. DOC is funding a major bittern population assessment project, with Emma Williams, project leader, recently speaking to the South Auckland Ornithological Society on her work involving the Whangamarino wetland - currently home to a network of regularly monitored recorders.

One hopeful sign in our district is an increase of sightings in and around protected wetlands.

Bittern sightings often occur quickly once a wetland is under restoration, so it is clear that every wetland project has great potential to assist the recovery of these birds.

Pest control is an essential adjunct as the low-lying nests are vulnerable to possums, rats, cats, and mustelids.

Emma would love to hear of bittern sightings, or the finding of a dead bird - her email is bittern.wills@yahoo.com. Sightings can also be recorded on the website <http://bittern-tracker.blogspot.co.nz/>.

Above: Australasian bittern in nest with chicks, 1959. Photo M.F.Soper, DOC.



Your membership helps keep our work going! Landcare's membership fee remains at an affordable \$10. Your membership really does assist our efforts - the more members, the more favourably Landcare work is perceived by those in officialdom as having benefit (numbers count....).

So if you wish to support us in this practical way, please contact us.

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