

30 May 2017

**Braided Rivers Partnership Project**

**Summary Report at the end of the first complete breeding season February 2017**

Implementation of Partnership Monitoring / Management

The key goal of the project is, broadly, to engage commercial river users in assisting with the monitoring and protection of two endemic braided river birds: black-billed gulls and black fronted terns, leading to a better outcome (ie better breeding success) for these endangered species.

Because the birds are migratory and do not necessarily return to the same sites, or even the same rivers each season, the challenge was—and is—to engage commercial rivers in the *possibility* of assisting with the kind of on-the ground action, such as trapping, that achieves a tangible result, which will ensure their continued participation. There was and remains no guarantee that the birds would, or will in the future, choose to nest in areas where potential partners operate.

The project did not get underway fully until after the breeding season was effectively over, in January 2016. Nevertheless, we were able to use the winter period in 2016 to:

**A. Design and develop:**

* A communications strategy
* An adaptive management plan to engage a wide range of commercial stakeholders in an equally wide range of possible strategies, depending on their level of interest and capacities.
* An accreditation programme to recognize the different levels and also variety of these organisations’ efforts
* A diverse range of birds ID kits, brochures, poster, and signs that could readily be adapted to suit different organizational needs and priorities
* A 24-page interactive teaching resource (also an iPad version)
* An understanding of critical knowledge gaps that could hinder the efficacy of existing management protocols. Simply put, figuring out what attracts these birds to nest in certain locations, so that the locations can be better managed to ensure optimal breeding success.
* A creative, fun, and inclusive community-wide outreach project (#TheFlockNZ)

**B. Implement:**

* All of the above, including connecting with river care groups and field researchers to help fill some of these knowledge gaps, and experiment with different management protocols.

At the beginning of the breeding season in July 2016, we had visited 17 potential ‘partners’ and recruited 11 of varying values (as measured in terms of their level and type of participation). #TheFlockNZ was also well underway.

The following on-the-ground outcomes had been achieved by the end of the first year of the project and simultaneously the first breeding season:

**Waiau River**

1. Following the ECan-led bird survey, two areas were identified as offering potential sites for a possible partner, Amuri Jet, to check traps: Shark Tooth and Marble Point winery. Black-fronted terns try to nest at both sites each year. When the birds appeared at Shark Tooth, BRaid implemented a trapping programme (with Amuri Jet volunteering to check traps). While predator tracks were seen, so was a huge population of rabbits, some recently killed and abandoned presumably by stoats. Nothing caught in traps during the season (what self-respecting predator would go into a trap baited with freeze-dried rabbit, given the existing population of bunnies?) Also sheep wandering around. See Dropbox for the full report.
2. 50 black-fronted terns pairs on Shark Tooth: around 0.4 fledgling success following major flooding
3. Traps (and most weeds and predators) 7 out of 10 lost in floods.
4. Based on the potential for a repeat flood event, we are currently lobbying the Zone Committee to implement a management plan for Marble Point winery site, as it is more likely to survive flooding but would benefit from mechanical weed clearing, improved morphology, and a strategic trapping programme.

**Wilberforce and Harper Rivers**

**Trustpower**:

1. Cleared several hectares of willows and exotic weeds from the Harper River delta
2. Implemented a small trapping programme (of limited value, but it generated enthusiasm and buy-in from the plant operators)
3. Installed several interpretation signs to ID the birds and explain their conservation status to visitors (mostly fishermen and trampers)
4. Although no bird count was undertaken, there was evidence of the newly cleared delta being used for nesting by banded dotterels and South Island pied oystercatchers. While these are not the targeted bird species, this is a beneficial collateral outcome of the project for two endemic braided driver bird species.
5. Trustpower awarded a Bronze Accreditation Award

This has led to an expanded relationship with Coleridge Habitat Enhancement Trust, which have since commissioned large permanent signs expanding around Lake Coleridge and Lake Selfe.

BRaid plans to undertake a bird survey on the Wilberforce River in 2017, subject to DOC’s application for funding to undertake a survey and trapping. If DOC receive this funding, we can divert our attention elsewhere.

**Orari River**

 **Fulton-Hogan**, in conjunction with the Orari River Care Protection Group and ECan have:

* Cleared weeds from and helped reshape an island in the river that had historically been used by black-fronted terns.
* Awarded a Bronze Accreditation Award

We did not expect this clearing could be done before the start of the season, so this was a bonus. We had arranged to loan the Orari River Care Protection Group additional traps. While these were not needed as no terns arrived to nest on the island, plans are underway to implement improved management protocols gleaned from experimental island formation in the lower Waitaki and Clarence (successful) and Ashley-Rakahuri (not successful but weed surveys were enlightening) rivers undertaken in 2016/2017.

**Waimakariri River**

* Developed a strong relationship with Christchurch International Airport (CIAL), who hosted #TheFlockNZ. CIAL is working in conjunction with ECan to control the predatory black-backed gull colonies that predate on black-billed gulls. There is no way to determine the level of positive impact this had on the black-billed gull colony, which was located by helicopter (funded entirely by CIAL) in the lower reaches of the river. Again, while this is an excellent strategic relationship with CIAL, it does not lend itself to tactical fund-raising to support the protection of endemic braided river birds.
* Ground-based bird survey of the upper Waimakariri completed, and showed that there has been relatively little change in braided river bird species over the past few years.

**Pareora River (Craigmore Farm)**

* Successfully hosted a colony of black-billed gulls through weed cleating and trapping.
* Awarded Bronze Accreditation Award
* Will follow up with monitoring protocols to count fledglings

**Ashley-Rakahuri River**

* AARG’s experiments with island formation, partially funded research into social attractants (to encourage black-fronted terns and black-billed gulls to nest on managed islands), and extensive surveying of the river for weeds, has led to a robust correlation between weed clearing and island formation (by Taggarts during gravel extraction), and the preferred breeding sites for river bird species. The value of these findings cannot be over-stated. They provide clear evidence of this relationship. This is key to developing and implementing robust (cost effective) management protocols.
* **Taggarts (gravel extractors):** awarded a Silver Accreditation for many years of work with the Ashley Rakahuri Rivercare Group (AARG) that ultimately led to these survey results.
* **Waikaku Beach Farm:** exemplar of the Partnerships Programme, the success of which has led to interest from (and articles by, amongst others), Fonterra and Irrigation New Zealand. At the beginning of the season, the Ashley River had become so weed infested that black-billed gulls instead set up a nesting colony on a nearby farm, within sight of SH-1. Working with the owner and manager, protecting the colony went off without a single hitch. Without intervention, the colony would have unquestionably failed, trampled by a herd of curious cows. The outcome: an estimated colony of 600-800 birds successfully raised 300- 400 chicks to fledgling stage; virtually an unprecedented outcome for this species in modern times.

**Summary**

At the outset we sent out broad net to capture as many people as possible to become involved in this project. One aim was for the project to become economically sustainable through tactical partnerships with multiple braided river tour operators. This is proving to be the most challenging, primarily because so few birds remain that only a scant few operators encounter them. Those operators expressing interest and have been willing to help have since been economically gored by the Kaikoura earthquakes. Even if we could get a donation stream flowing, the cost of recovering those donations would most likely exceed the fuel consumed to collect.

**We believe there is a compelling business case to be for directly seeking voluntary contributions from tourist for very specific outcomes: eg $20 will pay for baits in one trap for a season. $65 will pay for one trap…which will help save X number of birds. However, developing and implementing an ‘environmental tourism’ concept is beyond our capacity; it really needs to be driven from the top down, ie by DOC and Tourism NZ.**

Tourism operators aside, excellent progress has been made in the first 15 months or so, with KPIs being completed and exceeded well within time and under budget. This is in good part due to a substantial injection of funds from the Department of Internal Affairs (Lotto) to bolster the funding from DOC for this project. We have developed strong strategic corporate partnerships (CIAL, Trustpower), started a community project that spread from Kaikoura to Aoraki/Mt Cook, that we hope will take on a life of its own (#TheFlockNZ). We are actively working with other organisations to expand public awareness of braided river birds (Coleridge Habitat Trust, Kiwi Rail, Fonterra, Irrigation NZ., Amuri Jet). We have also developed relationships with Taggarts and Fulton-Hogan, which will prove beneficial as we are developing an improved understanding of the best protocols for island formation (part of a suite of management strategies) and are well-positioned to lobby the Waimakariri and Hurunui Zone Committees for funding to enhance habitats in these rivers. We have also had an excellent result in terms of improving bird breeding success rates, through the exemplar partnership with the Waikuku Beach Farm black-billed colony.

Black-billed bird numbers are up on previous years, but statistically this is not yet a trend, and could very well be indicative of more robust and comprehensive bird counts.

Our goal now is to consolidate the gains we have made, continue to expand public and corporate awareness of what has until now been a largely ignored conservation sector, ensure existing partners are able to become more independent, and establish more rigorous protocols for counting fledglings at the end of the breeding season so there is a more substantive result of improved breeding success. We will also seek to attract additional and robust cooperate partnerships, with perhaps less attention to tourism partnerships, which are financially and locationally more fickle.