

06 July 2017

**Braided Rivers Partnership Project – interim report**

**Summary**

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 non-breeding period in 2016 to complete Stages 1 and 2 as set out in the timeline, and have continued to implement all stages on time and within budget to June 30, 2017. While some aspects have required a re-think in the direction we’re taking, we’ve also had **a remarkable partnering with a dairy farm that led to an unprecedented positive breeding outcome for a colony of nationally endangered endemic black-billed gulls**.

Our goals now are 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 less attention to tourism partnerships, which are proving financially and locationally fickle.

**Background**

The key goal of the project is, broadly, to engage (primarily commercial) braided river users in assisting with the monitoring and protection of two endemic braided river bird species: the nationally critical black-billed gull and nationally endangered black fronted tern, leading to a better outcome (ie better breeding success) for these unique species. A positive outcome for these birds as ‘flagship birds’ will result in wide-ranging collateral benefits to other endangered specialist endemic braided river birds including the wrybill, and other species including nationally endangered invertebrates and reptiles, the overall ecological function and biodiversity of braided rivers, and their hydro-geomophological function as globally rare landscapes.

**Challenges/problems**

One aim was for the project to become economically sustainable through tactical partnerships with multiple braided river tourism operators. This is proving to be the most challenging, primarily because so few birds remain that only a scant few operators encounter them. Secondly, braided river birds are migratory and do not necessarily return to the same sites, or even the same rivers to breed each season, so there is little incentive for tour operators to protect or promote them, and no visible reason for tourists to donate. Moreover, tourism operators who assisted the first season such as Clarence River Rafting, have since been economically gored by the Kaikoura earthquakes.

The second issue we faced almost immediately, was that these birds, and indeed even braided rivers as ecologies, suffer an identity crisis. The birds are not iconic like kiwi or kakapo, and yet some are equally, indeed at greater at risk of extinction. We realised we needed to develop and implement an educational and outreach strategy before we could hope for stakeholder buy-in.

**Outline of work to date**

At the outset, we sent out broad net to capture as many people as possible to become involved in this project. Tourism operators and lack of public awareness aside, excellent progress has been made.

**Designed and developed:**

* A communications strategy
* An adaptive management plan to engage a wide range of stakeholders with an equally wide range of possible bird protection and habitat management strategies, depending on their level of interest and capacities.
* An accreditation programme based on global environmental auditing standards to recognize the different levels and also variety of these organisations’ efforts
* A diverse range of birds ID kits, brochures, poster, and signs readily adaptable to suit different organizational needs and priorities, aerial drone footage over key rivers to illustrate and demonstrate key issues, promote braided rivers, and assist with research (see attached examples)
* A 24-page interactive teaching resource (also an iPad version) + wide range of teaching resources for schools and libraries: <http://braid.org.nz/the-flock/teaching-resources/>
* 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) see <http://braid.org.nz/the-flock>

**Implemented:**

* All of the above, including connecting with river care groups and field researchers to help fill key knowledge gaps, and experiment with different bird protection management protocols
* Run two highly successful Braided Rivers workshops/seminars at Lincoln Events Centre to share information enabling better protocols, lobby local government, and reach out to the community at large: 2016 PDFs of papers presented: <http://braid.org.nz/about-braid/workshop-2016/> an 2017: <http://braid.org.nz/seminar-2017>

**Who participated: outcomes (by river/s):**

**Clarence River**

* Bird survey undertaken by Clarence River Rafting

**Waiau River**

1. Following bird survey, three location identified as potential sites for a possible partner:
2. Implemented trapping programme with Amuri Jet. 50 black-fronted terns pairs nested 2016/2017 season. Nothing caught in traps most likely due to high rabbit numbers.
3. Major flooding wiped out 70% of traps, 0.4 fledgling success
4. Based on the potential for a repeat flood event and other problems we identified, we successfully lobbied the Hurunui-Waiau Zone Committee to implement a management plan for 3 potential sites. Agreed in principle subject to implementation and communications/marketing strategy, with potential tourism sector engagement via Hanmer Springs

**Wilberforce and Harper Rivers**

**Trustpower** (<http://braid.org.nz/conservation/trustpower/>)awarded Bronze Accreditation Award under the Partnerships Programme, for:

* Clearing several hectares of willows and exotic weeds from the Harper River delta
* Implementing a small trapping programme (traps provided by BRaid)
* Installed several interpretation signs to ID the birds and explain their conservation status to visitors
* Although no bird count was undertaken last year, 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.
* 2018 plan to undertake benchmark bird survey along with other strategies currently being discussed.

This led to an expanded relationship with Coleridge Habitat Enhancement Trust, which commissioned large permanent signs expanding around Lake Coleridge and Lake Selfe – see attached draft of signage

**Orari River**

* **Fulton-Hogan**, awarded a Bronze Accreditation Award for clearing weeds from and helped reshape an island in the river that had historically been used by black-fronted terns (see aerial video footage here: <http://braid.org.nz/braided-rivers/orari-river/>)
* We did not expect this clearing could be done before the start of the first season, so this was a bonus as we had arranged to loan the Orari River Care Protection Group traps. While these were not needed as no terns arrived to nest on the island 2016/2-17, plans are currently underway to implement improved management protocols gleaned from experimental island formation elsewhere (see below). This will once again involve Fulton Hogan.

**Waimakariri River**

* Developed strong relationship with Christchurch International Airport (CIAL), who hosted #TheFlockNZ and who sponsored helicopter bird survey of the river below the gorge. CIAL is controlling the predatory black-backed gull colonies that predate on black-billed gulls.
* Ground-based bird survey of the upper Waimakariri completed
* Aerial footage of upper Waimakariri completed
* Now that Fulton Hogan recognises the role they can play, we will be discussing with them actions they can help with in the Waimakariri River

**Pareora River**

**Craigmore Farm** awarded Bronze Accreditation Award for **s**uccessfully hosting a colony of black-billed gulls through weed clearing and trapping

**Ashley-Rakahuri River**

Experiments with island formation and 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 the first really 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
* **Waikaku Beach Farm: exemplar of the Partnerships Programme**, the success of which has led to interest from and articles by, amongst others, Fonterra, Irrigation New Zealand etc. Working with the owner and manager, protecting the colony went off without a single hitch. Without intervention, this colony would have unquestionably failed, trampled by a herd of cows. The outcome: an estimated colony of 600-800 birds successfully raised 300-400 chicks to fledging**; virtually an unprecedented outcome for this species in modern times. See attached photo/certificate and One News video clip:** [**http://braid.org.nz/brpp/**](http://braid.org.nz/brpp/)(scroll down a wee bit).

**Projected over the next 18 months**

* Currently in discussions with local operator for trapping and working with jetboat operators on the Makarora/Wilkins Rivers – well worth taking a look at the 3 min video of this river as a outreach/promotional tool for braided rivers/jetboat operators: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g242GDSweiA>
* Further develop and implement management strategies on the Orari River based on island formation research now being completed in the upper Waitaki River (video of islands shows weed infestation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWFz38pStH0&t=3s>
* Develop project partnerships with Hanmer Springs operators and DOC to implement staged protection of islands and trapping in the Hope/Waiau Rivers
* Support ongoing education and outreach through #TheFlockNZ project, and creating signs in cooperation with DOC, ECan, local councils and tourism associations at the Rakaia, Tasman, and Hurunui Rivers, and local river groups and operators along the Makarora, Wilkins, and Ashley-Rakahuri River (the latter also in conjunction with the district council)
* Follow up fledgling opportunities for new partnerships with corporate entities
* Run trapping programmes in North and South Canterbury in 2017, work with Predator Free NZ to market the free events and bring in specialist speakers and widen reach
* Run braided rivers seminar again in 2018 (NB, we have been able to get outside funding for these seminars)
* Undertake river bird survey Wilberforce River, in conjunction with Trustpower
* Consolidate existing gains and partnership relationships
* Follow up every opportunity to develop and implement new partnerships
* Begin implementing active campaign to inform/educate the public about the problem of black-backed gull and hedgehog predation on braided river birds
* Similarly, continue active campaign re the deterioration of ‘braided’ rivers due to rapidly spreading weed species destroying their hydro-geomorphology.
* Adapt existing engagement/implementation strategies to maximise outcomes, where necessary

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**Sonny Whitelaw**

**Manager**

**Attached supporting evidence**

(NB, brochures and signs were paid for from BRaid’s contribution to the project and/or by third parties. The Flock birds were all created by volunteers)

* **Brochure**
* **example of signs for Trustpower - the Wilberforce River**
* **weeded delta area since cleared by Trustpower**
* **Trapping by Trustpower**
* **Proposed large scale sign for Lake Coleridge/Rakaia Habitat Trust**
* **trapping at Shark tooth, Waiau River**
* **Samples of accreditation certificate for partners**
* **The Flock brochure**
* **The Flock – example of children creating the birds**
* **The Flock makes front page news**
* **The Flock at Christchurch International Airport**
* **Photo: Braided River seminar attendees**