Black billed Gull Colony in the Ashburton River below State Highway One Bridge. 2014-15

August:

A few gulls were seen flying around the Ashburton township and elsewhere.

September:

Flocks of gulls seen in the country side feeding. A large number approximately 2,000 gulls settled at Lake Hood and adjoining riverbed for about three weeks feeding on larvae and midges in the lake.

Endangered Birds Nesting signs were put up at access points along the Ashburton river by F&B members and Peter Opthoog from Hakatere to Valetta. Signs are checked and replaced during the season as they are subject to vandalism. Signs are funded by ECan and latterly by ADC biodiversity fund. Signs and stakes cost about $40 for each site. The signs and their message are well known along the river. Unfortunately many signs and stakes need to be replaced each season because of damage or weathering. A fresh new sign gives a positive message.

October:

River flowing freely. No large concrete blocks required at Trevors Road as last year because the main channel was flowing there. Ecan placed a gate at the Tinwald access to the river. This was vandalised within a few days and was replaced with concrete blocks and soil. This received good publicity following a press release by Jo Abbott ECan.

Mid October a small number of gulls were beginning to gather about 100metres below the State highway bridge. Groups of up to several hundred birds were seen feeding on paddocks .

Late October particularly on the 28th the colony suddenly increased to the large number that eventually bred there.

November:

Rachel Mclennan’s flyover identified the large colony and she estimated that there were about 6000 birds.

Later estimated following analysis of photographs to be 9600

Don Geddes and Phil Cochrane ECan put red tape in the river and at a foot track site on riverbank near the colony.

19th November: Site visit and meeting held. Rachel McLennan, Jim Jolly, Phil Cochrane, Don Geddes, Jane Demeter and Edith Smith. Apology from DOC.

Discussion: Best methods of management of the colony. Wildlife Act was discussed and the warranting of a local person to ensure immediate action if the colony was disturbed.

The outcome from the meeting was circulated to interested people.

We received a response from Dave Winterburn, DOC Raukapuka, supporting the plan and information about advocacy and warranted officers. They asked to be kept informed of the progress of the colony.

Media Guardian, Courier and Mid Canterbury Herald reporters attended the site visit and subsequently they all printed articles about the colony. They also mentioned the Security Firm and DOC hotline for public to call.

Security Firm Masterguard was arranged to monitor the site as they travel to and fro across the river for $5 per day (funding to be arranged)

The firm was given an information pamphlet and a management plan about the braided river birds and they are familiar with approaching trespassers. They would call the DOC Hotline or in an emergency the local police.

Predators

ECan trapping programme on the Ashburton River from Bridge to Hakatere river mouth underway. ECan had put gates/blocks at the urban access to the river.

Forest and Bird received 8 DOC 200 traps via Phil Cochrane and regularly checked traps, baited with hare meat. Caught 1 stoat, 2 rats and 12 hedgehogs. One trap was burnt in a small fire alongside the colony.

2 cats were seen nearby. Timms traps were used for a short period with no success.

December

Vehicles

Jane emailed the Canterbury 4WD Club with information about the braided river bird requirements. It was hoped the email would be circulated to their members.

December 8th:

Jane gave a great presentation to the Ashburton Borough Greenies Group. Later the children visited classes to tell other pupils about the gulls.

Jess arranged a poster competition featuring the habitat and protection for the gulls. The result is a beautiful collection of artwork from which Jess plans to produce nesting bird signs.

December 18th: More signs ordered using available funding.

During the hotter periods in December it was noted that there seemed to be a large number of small chick casualties along the edge of the colony.

While there was a main large breeding colony and two smaller areas there appeared to be a number of non breeding birds alongside the colony possibly 400 birds. About 100 non breeding birds spent the summer at the Ashburton domain pond.

January

January 14th Site viewed by Phil Cochrane and Edith Smith. The chicks were well on their way to fledging and well spread out over the riverbed alongside the water. Creching was very obvious.

Counting was done with spotterscope and binoculars from the Ashburton River Bridge and was an approximate estimation of 1200 or 1300 fledglings.

It was difficult to assess the numbers that might have already flown.

There was email discussion about counting the birds in the colony before fledging and decision to do a casualty and nest count once fledging complete.

Monitoring by Masterguard was discontinued 31st January

February

Traps removed early February

The colony gradually dispersed since the observation in January and by February 26th when the final survey was carried out 3 adults and 3 young gulls only remained.

Reasonable numbers have been seen foraging out in the adjoining countryside.

Final Survey nests and casualties 26th February 2015

Leader: John Dowding, Jane Demeter, Jan Walker, Colleen Phillip, Edith and Peter Smith

Casualties were counted and defined as chicks, juveniles and adults. Also obvious signs of predation were noted. Many of the chicks were barely visible such was their decay.

The nests were divided into grids with orange tape and the observers used fluorescent spray marker to identify the nests. The nests were in places very close to one another, some may have been abandoned early, others had dead chicks and motorcycles had already left their mark but generally the nests were easy to identify and count.The survey took about 3 hours to complete.