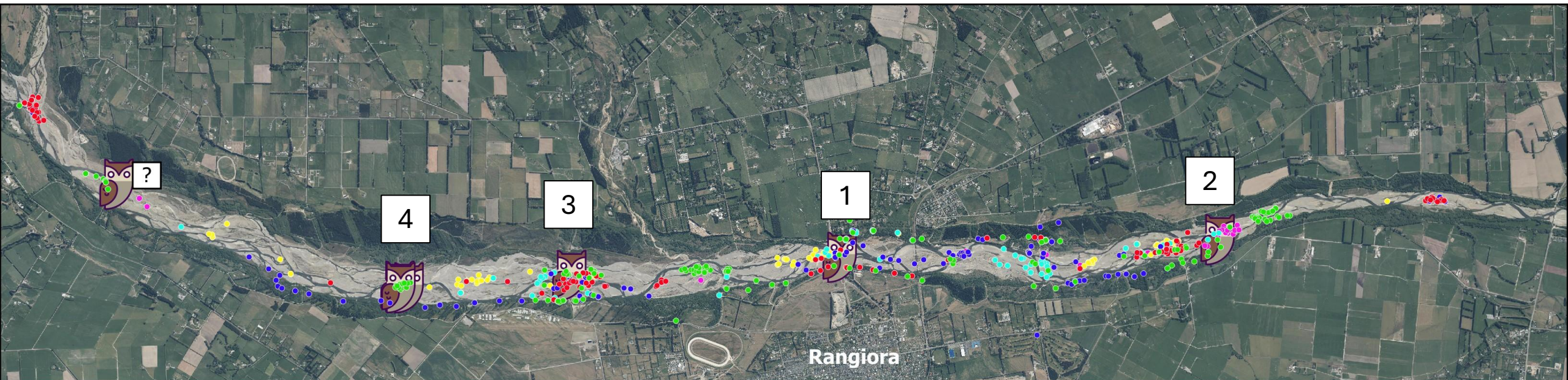


# Little Owl Depredation of Braided River Birds

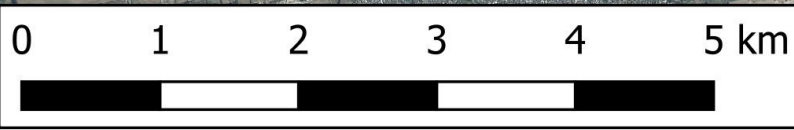


Grant Davey and Emily Wium





- 2025 Trail Cameras [176]
- 2024 Trail Cameras [134]
- 2023 Trail Cameras [145]
- 2022 Trail Cameras [61]
- 2021 Trail Cameras [84]
- 2020 Trail Cameras [27]



7/4/26



Total - 627 camera locations

**Trail Camera Locations  
2020 - 2026  
and Little Owl Occurrences**

Owls detected because of copious trail camera use

Four little owl sightings in 2024 – 2025, one interpreted in 2020. More than one owl strongly suspected.



**Site 1.** Owl hunting mice where rat dog detected Norway rats under log in river



**Site 2.** Owl at wrybill nest, no damage done

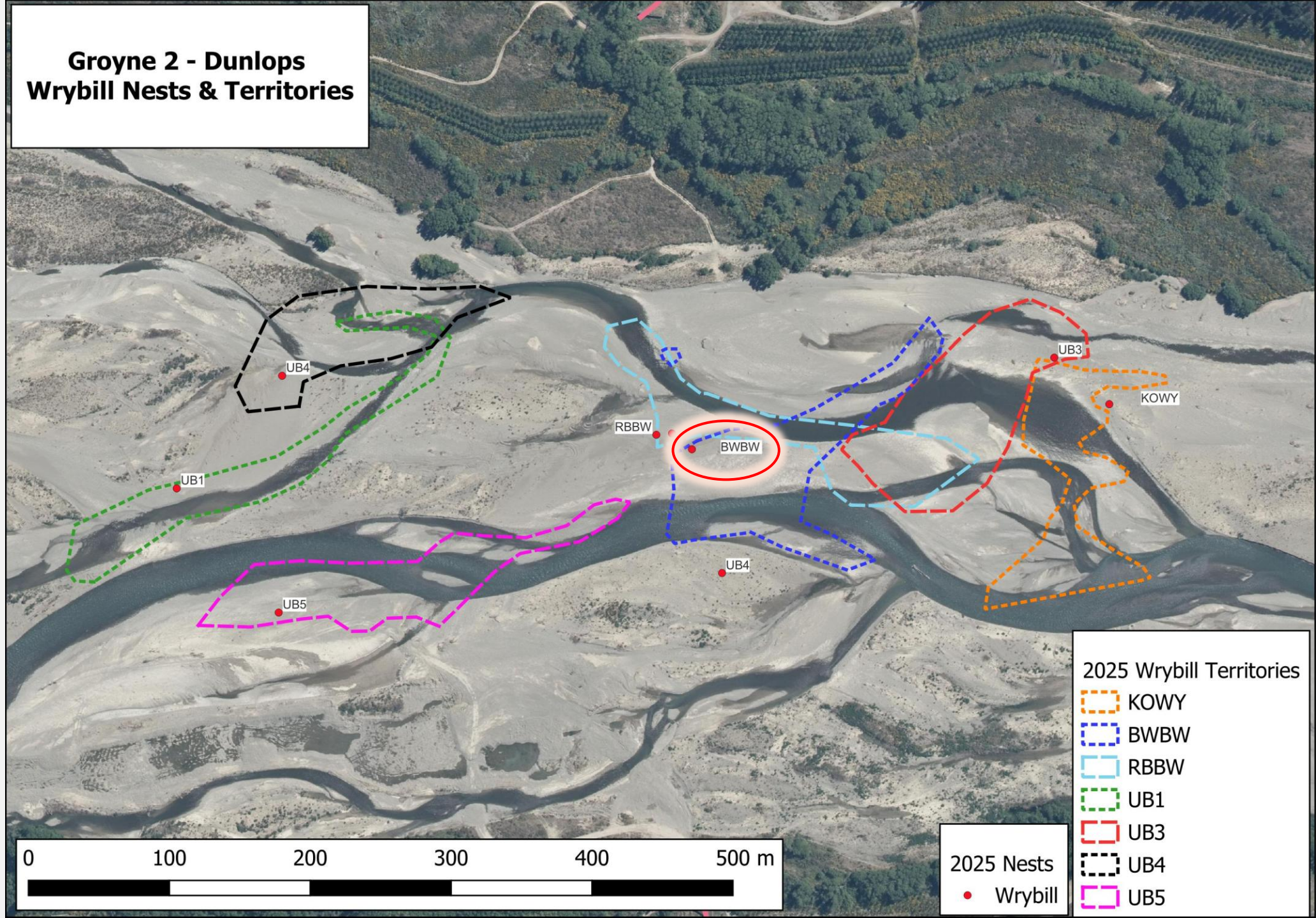
# Site 3

## Groyne 2 - Dunlops Wrybill Nests & Territories

BWBW nest, in the middle of a prime wrybill nesting area

Overlapping territories are from later nesting birds

Only BWBW affected by owl.



## **BWBW - a truly remarkable bird**

- Banded blue-white, blue-white (bands fallen off in recent years) on the Ashley in 2010
- Nested there ever since, despite average return history of banded wrybill being 3.2 years
- Fewer than 1% of wrybills live to more than 15 years (Pukukoro – Miranda newsletter).
- Known to double-nest, even when first nest successful
- First to nest on the river, last season first egg hatched 10 days before any others.
- Claims the middle of a prime wrybill nesting area
- Unusually protective of his mate, feeds near the nest and returns at any sign of trouble. She has regular lunch hour off the nest at midday.





BWBW - firmly on nest while trail camera card changed, 2m away. His mate flies off, he comes to replace her.

Male wrybill intruder, video.

Such protective behaviour not seen at the other 13 wrybill nests monitored with cameras in 2025 - 2026



BWBW returning  
to nest soon after  
chick hatched

Hatching began by 4.52pm,  
completed by 6.01pm



13 C 29.21 inHg

TRAILCAM12

09/24/2025 06:42PM

Video

Chick taken by  
owl



14 C 29.20 inHg

TRAILCAM08

09/24/2025 07:08PM

Video

About to hatch egg eaten on site



16 C 29.21 inHg

TRAILCAM08

09/24/2025 07:19PM

BWBW  
returned  
between owl  
visits, didn't  
seem to  
recognize the  
danger



Video

His mate called for him from the nest site for 4 hours. He never returned.

Last season he lost his second clutch of eggs to a cat. He returned at 8am the next morning.



11C 29.1 inHg

TRAILCAM08

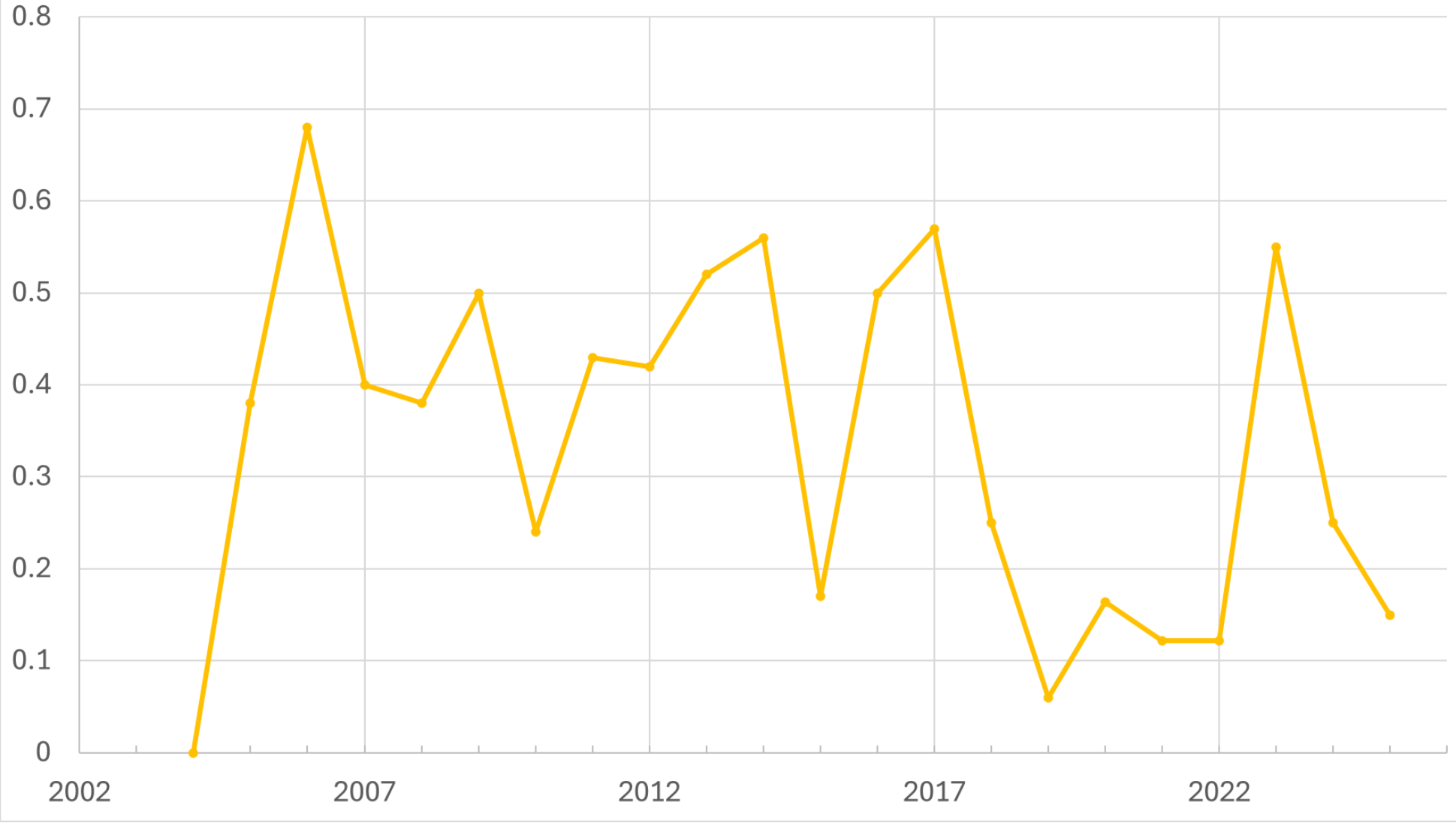
09/25/2025 06:18AM

# Little owl (*Athene Noctua*)

- The little owl is a nocturnal raptor native to Europe, temperate Asia, North Africa & the Middle East
- Introduced to NZ (SI only) in the early 1900s to control small birds that were damaging crops
- There has been minimal research on what is the only deliberately introduced bird of prey to Aotearoa
- Until now, there have been no documented reports of endangered braided river bird depredation by the little owl



BFT Fledgling Productivity per Nest



Average fledgling productivity per nest since 2018 = 21%

Fledgling productivity per nest 2025 = 0.15 (15%)

# The first sign of trouble



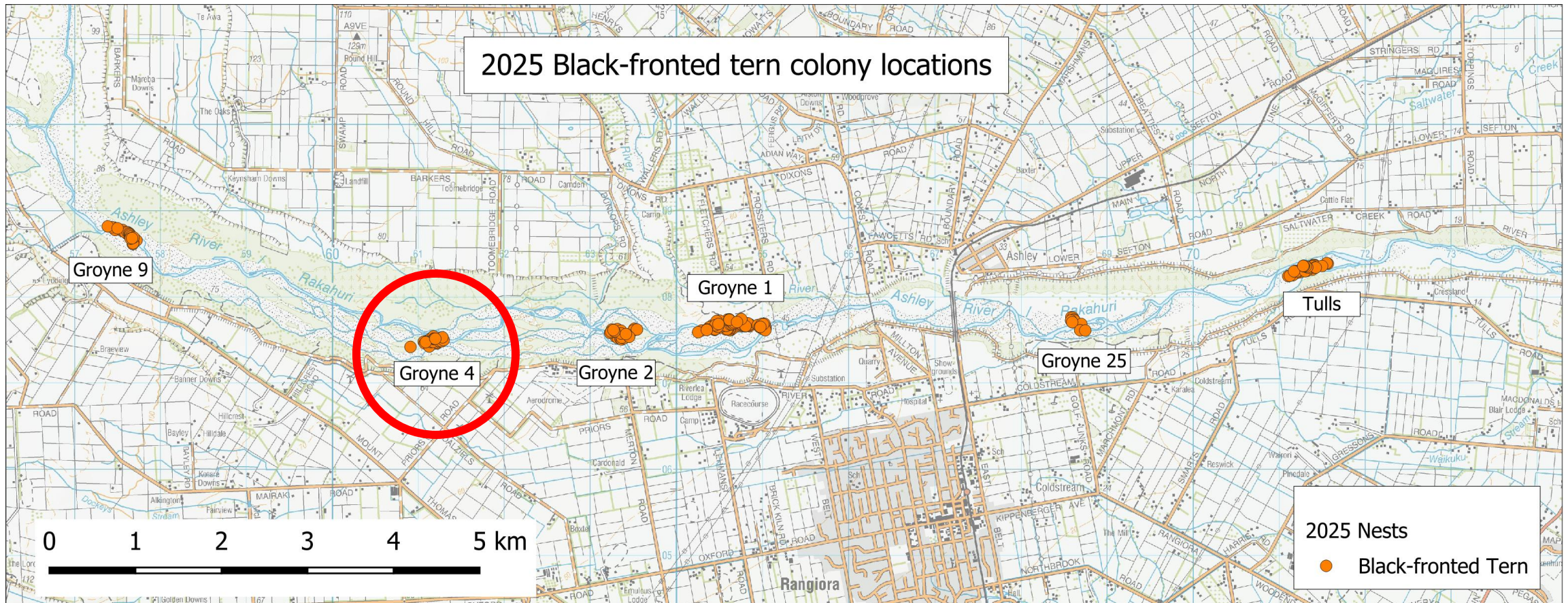
- 3 headless BFT carcasses were found at this colony prior to us seeing the little owl on cameras
- We first detected little owl presence when we placed a trail camera at one of these carcasses to observe scavenger activity
- Note: No DNA testing was done to definitively attribute the 3 corpses to the little owl. It is acknowledged that consuming the head is characteristic of other predators beside the little owl.



Animated GIF from 1 second interval photos. Owl killing BFT.

# More from the trail cameras





○ Colony in which the little owl depredation occurred

# Groyne 4



## 2025 Nests

- Black-fronted Tern

## Traps Oct 25

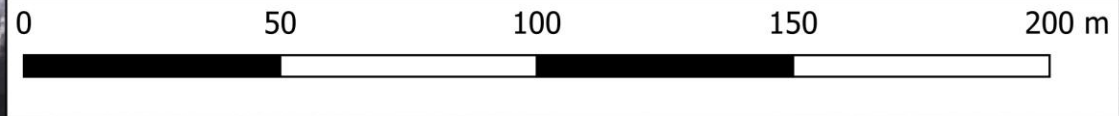
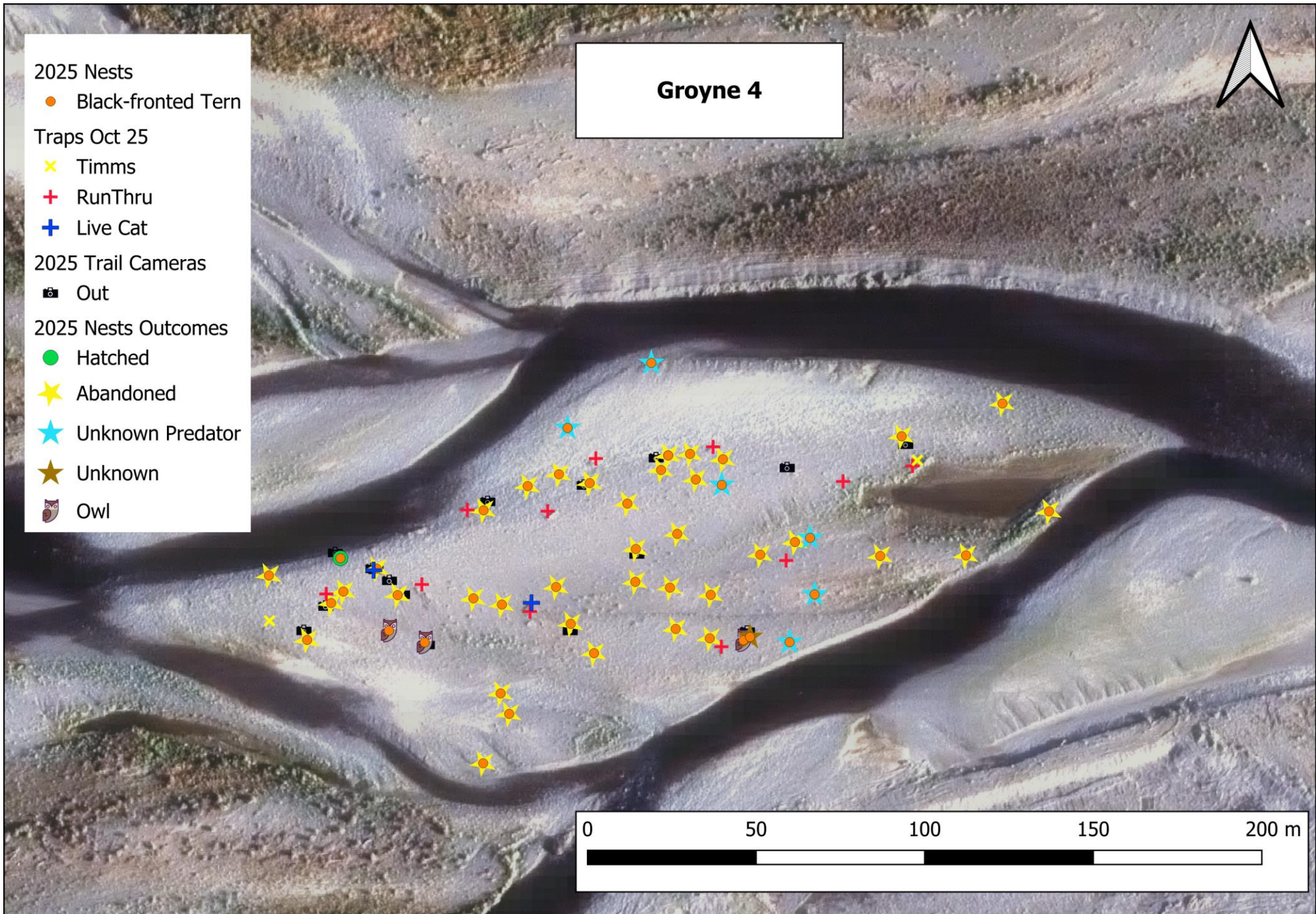
- ✕ Timms
- + RunThru
- + Live Cat

## 2025 Trail Cameras

- 📷 Out

## 2025 Nests Outcomes

- Hatched
- ★ Abandoned
- ★ Unknown Predator
- ★ Unknown
- 🦉 Owl



# Things to watch out for in the field

- This photo is from 2020, taken at a colony which had unexplained similar mass abandonment and some eggs eaten
- It may be good practice to place trail cameras at corpses to determine what is scavenging
- Little owls, as well as other predators such as cats and stoats, are known for their opportunistic feeding habits - often only consuming the head of prey due to its nutritional value



# CONCLUSIONS

- These findings document the **first known case of little owl depredation** of endangered braided river birds (or any other endangered native bird?) in NZ
- **Key indicators** of owl presence may include headless corpses, although without DNA or camera footage, it is not possible to confirm.
- **Increased use of trail cameras** and careful monitoring is needed to both detect owl presence and further our understanding on how to help the special braided river birds
- Cannot yet say if the little owl is or will become a major driver for decline or if they are just another of many predators. Regardless we feel that it has been an important discovery.



12 C 29.88 inHg

TRAILCAM06