Lower Upukerora Restoration Group Annual Report 2024/2025

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Photo 1: Von pair's fledgling just short of 6 weeks old. Credit: A. Kohler

Establishment and purpose of LURG

- Vision
    - Restore natural fauna assemblages of the lower Upukerora delta focusing on braided river bed and wetland bird species
    - Encourage public use that is commensurate with the natural and cultural values of the site
    - Restore the flora of the delta to align with historic natural species compositions and provide habitat and food for local native fauna
- Status (Current)
    - The group consists of 100% volunteers.
    - The group has formalised itself to enable the establishment of a bank account in the group's name.
    - A committee is appointed with George Ledgard as the chair (standing down from the 25_26 season due to relocating to North Canterbury), Hannah Edmonds as the Secretary and Sue Marwick as the Treasurer.
    - We are operating under a community agreement with DOC which expires on the 20th November 2029.

- The group communicates via a Facebook page and email address (upukrestoration@gmail.com). It meets two to three times a year on an as-required basis, with one meeting at the end of the trapping season serving as an AGM.
- Trapping resources and supplies are currently donated by volunteers or sectors of the community.
- We received Meridian powerup funding, of which a small proportion is yet to be spent. Remaining funding is there to be spent on necessary items such as advocacy signs, trapping supplies and hardware.
- We continue to maintain an ongoing positive relationship with the Fiordland Trails Trust on trapping and planting activities they are undertaking. Hannah Edmonds is the current key contact with the FTT.

2024/2025 Actions and Results

Threats

Again, aside from predators (feral and domestic) and dogs on the loose, vehicle activity is the main threat to our local populations of river birds. We continue to advocate in the community for responsible use of the riverbed through our Facebook posts, and signage at access points along the river. River changes have supported this by cutting off two 4WD access points to the lower river.

The perennial issue of weeds providing cover for predators and reducing the available habitat for nesting areas is still present. Although the gravel clearance on the delta undertaken in 2002 followed by floods managed to stifle weed (primarily lupin) establishment for a couple of seasons, we are now seeing the effects wane with lupins and broom becoming well established over much of the active riverbed/floodplain.

The annual weeding working bee took place at the delta and Tern Island however this is only a fraction of the available nesting area. Fingers crossed for some heavy floods in the 2025-26 year to clear the riverbed.

Trapping

Photo 2: A double whammy. In fact, there were 5 stoats in three traps in this section – probably an unwitting group of juvenile stoats

Traps were checked on average at two weekly intervals during the breeding season (August to January inclusive). Monthly checks took place outside the breeding season. All data was entered into the TrapNZ trapping application.

Surprisingly, despite significant flooding we only lost one trap. The system of tying traps on a tethered cord attached to a waratah works well. The trap that was lost was the only one in the flood zone not to be tied to a waratah.

Unfortunately, with the cessation of their Jobs for Nature funding the Fiordland Trails Trust has had to pare back their trapping program. They are still proposing to fund checks, albeit at a reduced extent and frequency when compared to previous years.

We have been running with a core group of trappers which, in general, has been enough to service the network without overburdening individuals with too much work. However, it was acknowledged that some redundancy in our pool of trappers might be nice if people are unavailable for periods of time. Fortunately, we have added 4 new members to the trapping team. This more than offsets the departure of George to North Canterbury.

Aside from increased catches of rats in the first year of the project (Figures 1 & 2) catches have remained relatively stable through time. There was a thought that numbers caught would drop after the FTT buffer trapping began in October 2021, however this does not appear to necessarily be the case from the data. It will be interesting to see if there are any changes to our trapping catch rates if the FTT reduce their effort. We are unsure why catch rates were unusually low between January 2022 - July 2022.

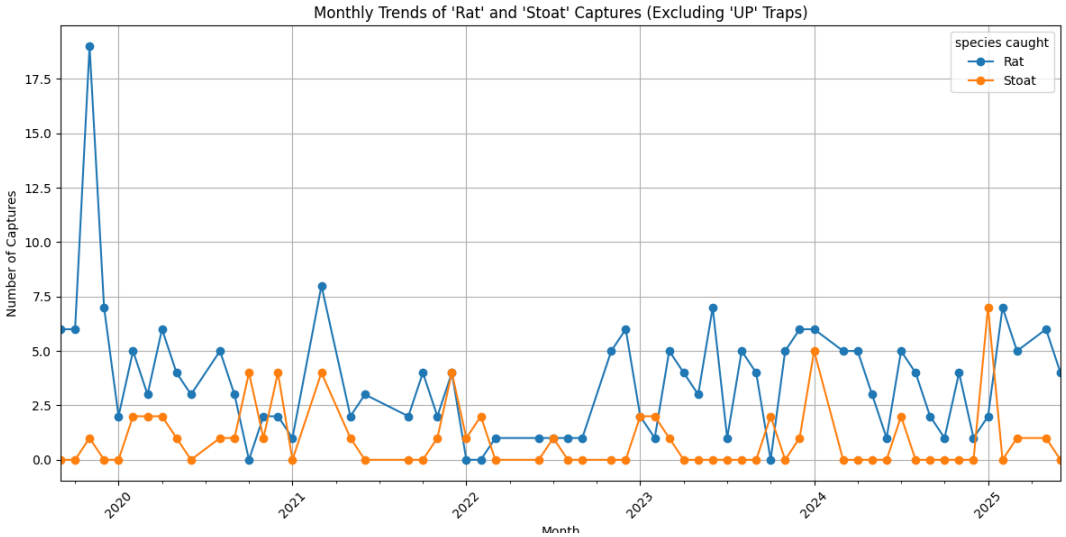

Figure 1: Raw monthly trapping results from the project's inception, September 2019 to 30th August 2024.

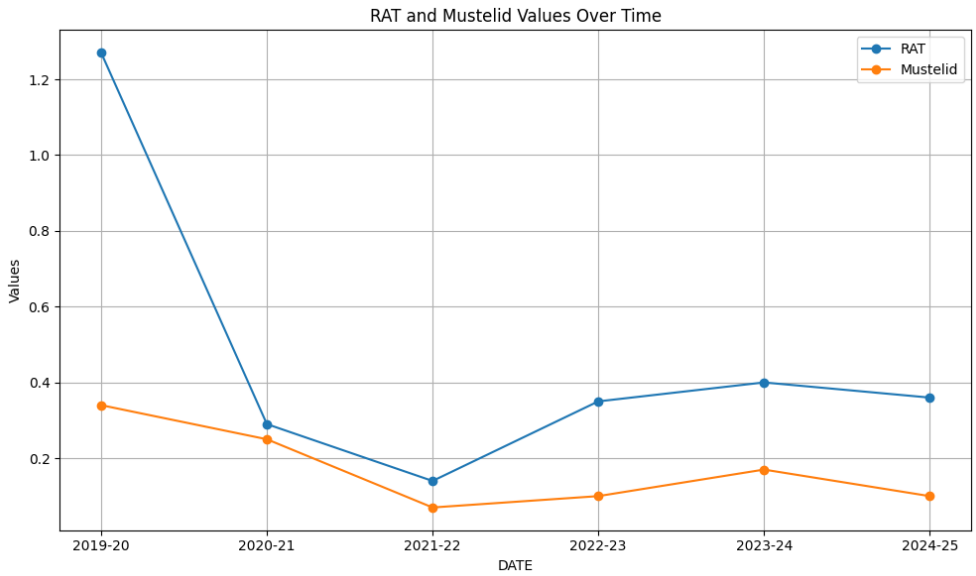

Figure 2: Standardised annual trapping results from the project's inception (Catches/100 trap nights), Year runs 1st July to 30th June.

Rat captures appear to be relatively evenly spread over the trapping area over the last 5 years, however mustelid captures are concentrated at the delta, particularly on the true right (Figure 3).

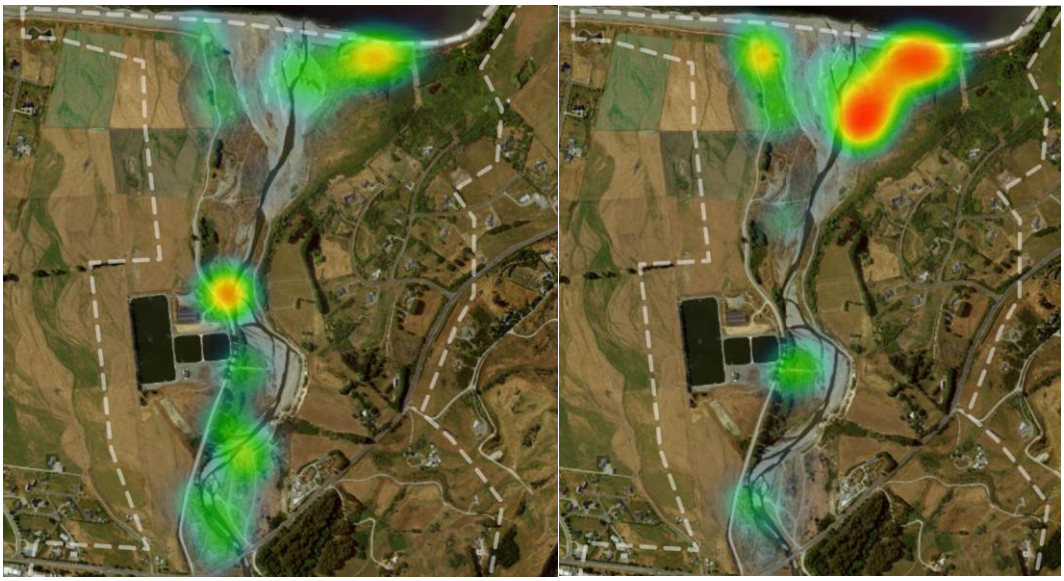

Figure 3: 2019 – 2025 heat map of rat captures (left) and mustelid captures (right) in the project trapping area

Monitoring

Volunteer hours 1 Apr 2024 – 30 Mar 2025: 281 hours and 11 minutes in the field plus well over 100 hours data entry, report writing etc.

Black fronted terns

No terns nested on Tern Island this season. Approximately 4-5 pairs had nest attempts at the Delta producing approximately 3 -4 juveniles. In January 50 to 65 terns including at least 6 juveniles used the Delta, but the majority of these nested elsewhere.

Maximum number seen: 61 on 4th Jan 2025 at the Delta. Absent from late March to mid-July.

Banded dotterels

2024/25 had the lowest banded dotterel nest success of the four years monitored (35%), but not the lowest breeding success (a higher proportion of nests failed, but a higher proportion of chicks that hatched survived to fledging).

Total of 20 nests were found and a further 4 breeding attempts where chicks were seen but no nest had been found.

	2024/25	2023/24	2022/23	2021/22
Number of territories	19	25	21	20
Number of pairs	19	24	20	17
Total number of nests found	20	25	19	16
Number of successful nests (at least 1 chick known to have left nest- found nests only)	7 (35%)	12 (48%)	15 (79%)	9 (56%)
Number of failed nests	13 (65%)	13 (52%)	4 (21%)	7 (44%)
Number of young known to have left the nest (found nests only)	14	27	32	19
Number of young known to have fledged (found nests only)	9 (64% chance of a hatched chick fledging)	4 – 6 (19% chance of a hatched chick fledging)	18 (56% chance of a hatched chick fledging)	8 (42% chance of a hatched chick fledging)
Number of successful breeding attempts (fledged at least 1 chick -from found nests only)	7 (35%)	4 (16%)	9 (47%)	5 (31%)
Total number of breeding attempts known (including those where chicks were seen but we had not found a nest for this attempt)	24	30	23	25
Total number of fledglings produced (including those for whom a nest was not found)	15	7 – 9	19	14
Number of fledglings produced per pair	0.79	0.29 – 0.38	0.95	0.82

Max Planck Institute study

Ten banded dotterel (including O Flag) were colour banded on 14/10/2024 by a team from the Max Planck Institute, Germany, as part of a NZ wide study to investigate their movements, site use and interconnectedness.

Blood samples (for DNA analysis), feather samples (for isotope analysis), morphometrics (wing, tarsus, culmen, head, chest band, amount of black on forehead, white on forehead, moult scores, weight) and photos were taken.

Our colour band re-sightings have been entered into the DOC 'Report a sighting' webpage https://app.birdbanding.doc.govt.nz/sightings

Black billed gulls

No nesting at the Delta or any of our study sites. The greatest number seen in our monitoring areas this season was on 19th January when 515 were counted at the mouth of the Delta (a mix of adults and juveniles).

Black backed gulls

One pair of black backed gulls nested at the Delta. They laid 3 eggs, 2 of whom hatched and fledged.

South Island pied oystercatchers

Nine SIPO breeding attempts were monitored; two at the Delta, five in the second paddock from South Arm Drive (private land so not close approached), and two on the lakeshore. Only two of these nests fledged young.

Pied stilts

One pied stilt breeding attempt in our monitoring areas this season. It was not close approached for fear of disturbance -they successfully fledged one chick.

Additional pied stilt fledglings were seen at Westend and the Delta in early 2025, but they are thought to have hatched outside of our monitoring areas. The river bird survey on the 1 Dec recorded 20 adult pied stilts but no chicks, most of these were outside our monitoring areas.

Unusual sightings

Variable oystercatcher 14 and 29/09/2024

Royal spoonbill 18 - 24/12/2024

Grey backed storm petrel (long dead) 20/01/2025

Pukeko 8/03/2025

Other

River bird survey conducted on 1/12/2024

5 Minute Bird Counts done monthly.

Species and event	Date in 2024/25 season	Date in 2023/24 season	Date in 2022/23 season	Date in 2021/22 season
Banded dotterel				
First mating seen	28/07/2024	5/08/2023 (Delta)	After first nest found so N/A	11/08/2021
First banded dotterel nest found	08/09/2024 (TR Delta)	14/08/2023 (Delta)	22/08/2022 (Delta)	04/09/2021
First date O(range) Flag seen	18/08/2024	13/08/2023	25/09/2022	11/08/2021
Last date O(range) Flag seen	16/02/2025 (as of 23/03/2025)	08/01/2024	15/01/2023	1/12/2021
First chicks seen	14/10/2024 (TL Tern Is)	30/09/2023 (TL Tern Is)	16/09/2022 (Delta)	05/10/2021 (TL Tern Is)
First banded dotterel fledgling seen	23/11/2024 (TL Tern Is)	14/12/2023 (Delta)	09/11/2022	11/11/2021
South Island pied oystercatcher				
First SIPO of the season seen	29/06/2024 (Westend)	16/04/2023	29/05/2022	27/06/2021
First SIPO nest suspected	18/08/2024 (Westend)	13/08/2023 (mating seen 5/08)	10/08/2022	04/09/2021
First chicks seen	14/10/2024 (Delta)	17/10/2023 (10 days old)	14/09/2022	16/09/2021
First fledgling seen	10/11/2024 (Delta)	N/A	1/10/2023	15/11/2021
Last SIPO sighting of the season	18/02/2025	1/01/2024	1/01/2023	21/01/2022
Pied Stilt				
First pied stilt of the season seen	20/07/2024 (Delta)	04/08/2023	31/07/2022	2/08/2021
First pied stilt nest suspected	03/11/2024 (Delta)	4/11/2023	22/10/2022	24/10/2021
First pied stilt chicks seen	17/11/2024 (Westend)	27/11/2023	6/01/2023	03/11/2021
First fledglings seen	02/01/2025 (Westend)	31/01/2024	02/02/2023	23/11/2021
Last pied stilt sighting of the season	08/03/2025 (as of 23/03/2025)	11/02/2024	25/03/2023	12/02/2022
Black fronted tern				
First black fronted tern of the season seen	29/06/2024 (Westend)	30/06/2023	21/07/2022	24/07/2021
Mating seen	N/A	21/10/2023 (Tern Is)	25/10/2022 (Tern Is)	16/10/2021 (Tern Is)
First black fronted tern nest suspected	28/11/2024 (Delta)	21/10/2023 (Tern Is)	21/10/2022 (Tern Is) 10/11/2022 (Delta)	16/10/2021 (Tern Is)
First chick seen	07/12/2024 (> **week old**, Delta)	20/11/2023 (Tern Is)	18/12/2022 (Delta)	22/11/2021 (Tern Is)
First fledgling seen	04/01/2025 (Delta)	21/12/2023 (Tern Is)	10/01/2023 (Delta)	21/12/2021 (Tern Is)
Last black fronted tern sighting of season	13/03/2025	28/02/2024 (as of 17/03/2024)	10/03/2023	02/04/2022
Black billed gull				
First mating seen	N/A	08/10/2023	N/A	28/08/2021
First nest suspected	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
First fledglings seen	10/01/2025 (Delta from elsewhere)	16/12/2023		
Pipit				
Last sighting of season (breed elsewhere)	15/10/2024	02/09/2023	29/08/2022	03/10/2021
First of season (return for winter following breeding elsewhere)	23/02/2025	27/01/2024	15/01/2023	28/03/2022

Advocacy

Advocacy for the Lower Upukerora Restoration is largely by word of mouth when team members are in the area, and social media with our Facebook page: Lower Upukerora Restoration Group. We have 413 followers, and we average 1 or 2 posts per month. These posts are also often shared on the local Te Anau Community Facebook page to spread awareness and attract more followers.

Volunteer Hours (minimum)

Bird Monitoring

Monitoring	259 hrs
Data entry & Reporting	100+ hrs

Trapping and weeding

It takes approximately 5 hours to check all the traps. Traps were checked 16 times during the course of the year. In addition, we had one weeding event.

Trapping	95 hrs
Working Bee's (weeding)	12 hrs

Administration (incl. FTT liaison)

Annual Report & TrapNZ	20 hrs
Liaison with DOC and FTT	16 hrs
LURG Meeting Attendance	50 hrs

TOTAL: 530 hrs (minimum)

2025/26 Actions and objectives

Trapping:

To maintain the LURG trapping programme around the lower Upukerora delta to lower predator numbers. Focus predators are rats, stoats, hedgehogs, feral cats, weasels and ferrets.

Keep an eye on the FTT program to ensure programs are complementary.

Monitoring:

To continue monitoring indigenous birds nesting and roosting in the lower Upukerora delta area. This will enable us to determine if the current predator control regime allows or contributes towards positive breeding and recruitment in banded dotterels, black-fronted terns and black-billed gulls.

Investigate the opportunity to secure funding to support the administration and reporting components of the monitoring program.

Long term planning:

The establishment of a committee has formalised the group and enabled it to bank any funds that come the groups way in the future to maintain our activities. At the June 2024 end of year AGM it was discussed whether the group wanted to consider taking on more trapping if the Fiordland Trails Trust were not prepared to continue servicing the traps they had established. This was considered again this year - the answer from the volunteers was the same as previous years - a resounding no; adding these traps to our trap network would place too much burden on our volunteer capacity, and adding significantly more volunteers would also do the same. It was agreed we were keen to see the Trails Trust maintain their trapping program beyond the Jobs for Nature funding period.

It was agreed to try seek extra funding to cover trapping and monitoring expenses such as bait or monitoring travel expenses.

Advocacy and awareness:

- Our key actions are to raise public awareness of site fauna values and of braided river birds by maintaining Facebook posts.
- Deter dogs and 4WDs from accessing the Lower Upukerora River breeding and roosting areas during the breeding season by installing signage at all access points. Work with stakeholders to limit vehicle access to the riverbed.
- Work with the local schools where possible, and where capacity permits, to raise the awareness of the values in the area with the younger generations.

Continue to support the FTT biodiversity restoration work:

Continue to liaise with the FTT on planting, monitoring and trapping projects.

Acknowledgements

Volunteers

Many thanks to all the volunteers who made the sixth year of this project such a success. The ease with which the group works together and delivers the mahi has made the project so simple to manage. Thanks to all for your efforts!

Meridian

Thanks to the Meridian Power Up Fund for providing the flexibility to spend the remaining funding on other items of importance to the group, such as trapping equipment

Edge Effect

Although a subcontractor to the FTT. Gerard has been a big supporter of the group and has gone out of his way to ensure both programs are complementary and keep us informed of what he is up to.

Fiordland Trails Trust

Thank you for leading and delivering the Kaimahi for Nature project which will provide a significant boost for biodiversity in the area, as well as for recreation. We also wish to acknowledge their funding support for the monitoring which is allowing the intensity and quality of the monitoring and reporting to be maintained.

Other supporters of the project

There are many other supporters of the group in the wider community and we look forward to meeting you or seeing you in the lower Upukerora in the future. Many thanks for your support and kind words.

Ka ora te whenua, ka ora te tāngata

"When the land is well, the people are well"