



Newsletter *Summer 2023*

Welcome to the Summer 2023 edition, and an extra welcome to the 100+ new recipients from the town end of the Peninsula. I hope you all find this update interesting and informative!

2023 has been an exciting year for our project, with some solid gains made towards our goal of full eradication of possums from the Otago Peninsula. At the far end of the Peninsula the elusive Te Rauone “Bandit” was finally caught using a combination of different tools and strategies. Ultimately it was a trusty old yellow Timms trap that completed the job, but many hours of work and a variety of detection methods were utilised to get us to that point. We’re thrilled with this particular success but we won’t be cracking out the champagne until we manage to track down all of the last remaining possums.

Blooming success

We haven’t reached zero possums yet, but we’ve lowered the pressure enough for one happy Peninsula resident. Joan Huff from The Cove has been carefully tending her Banksia rose plant for the past 30 years. This is some serious dedication, because not once in those 30 years of tender care has this rose had an opportunity to bloom. Instead of flowers, the deck railing would be festooned with possum droppings, and many times Joan came close to giving up and planting something a bit less tasty. But her patience (and many years of trapping) have finally paid off this summer with a gorgeous display of creamy yellow coloured roses. Only 30 years in the making! Her hard work hasn’t stopped yet, she’s still got her trap baited and set so that she doesn’t lose the gains so hard won. The only downside is that she’s had to prune the branches twice this summer already – something that never had to happen before when the possums were eating it all!



Drone sweeps

Last month, we welcomed back High Country Contracting (HCC) to conduct a further drone sweep of Sandfly Bay and some areas of Sector 2 – a section above the Okia reserve. This work is being done in areas with very low possum numbers to help us get the remaining individuals, and in areas where we know there are still stable populations to find out where they're hiding. The drone HCC use is equipped with two very high-spec cameras – one is a thermal imaging camera used to detect body heat from animals, and the other is used to zoom in on a target to confirm what the animal is. When the drone operator finds a possum, its location is pinpointed, and a hunter is deployed to find and dispatch the possum.

Much to our excitement, HCC reported no possum sightings in the area above Okia! This is super exciting as this area has been a long time hot-spot, and the team have conducted many trapping operations over the years. However, our work here is not done yet – we want to use as many tools as possible to really hone in on areas such as this, to make sure we are searching every nook and cranny. The drone work is currently being followed up with some intensive camera monitoring, and we are looking forward to sharing the results from this.

We know there are still a few breeding populations in the Sandymount/Sandfly Bay reserve, so it wasn't a surprise when HCC reported back with a few possum sightings. Thanks to the perseverance of the hunting team, they were able to find and dispatch seven possums. The drone is especially helpful in these areas as a lot of possums like to hang out on cliff faces – an area that is very hard to access on foot! The hunters can dispatch the possums that are safe to access, then the team can follow up with traps and toxin on the edges of the cliff faces. For the flatter areas of the reserve, it is extremely helpful to get a birds-eye view so we can effectively plan our next steps for trapping.

Finding the last possums would be much harder without the help of cool technology such as the drone, and we are looking forward to using it in more areas next year.



***Left: thermal imaging camera shows a white spot – body heat from a suspected possum
Right: camera zoomed in on heat signature confirms the animal is a possum***

Fernbird sightings on the rise



Fernbird at Sandymount. Photo credit: Jenilee Hill

Early last year, team member Jenilee stopped in her tracks while checking bait stations at Sandymount, when she heard a high-pitched bird call she didn't recognise. After investigating a rustle in a nearby muehlenbeckia bush, she was greeted by a spotty little bird with a long tail. The bird stayed still just long enough for Jenilee to capture a short video. After some research and confirmation from Rod Morris, one of the peninsula's bird experts, we were overjoyed to confirm that the bird was a New Zealand fernbird/mātātā – likely the first confirmed sighting of the species in Sandymount in many decades!

Months passed without another sighting, but we continued to hope that there was a population thriving somewhere in Sandymount. To our surprise, team member Lisa returned after installing traps at Boulder Beach with photos of another fernbird! Our hopes of a strong population of these inconspicuous birds were growing. Just last month, Operations Manager Paula returned from Sandymount with a similar description of a bird to the one Jenilee saw. Sure enough, more than a year after the initial sighting, Paula spotted a fernbird in almost the exact same location! Since these sightings, we have seen more reports of fernbird sightings on the Peninsula – even one possible sighting in Bacon Street!

As the possum numbers continue to decrease, we are receiving more reports of native animals popping up in places they haven't been seen in before. Our team and the community are helping our precious endangered animals to return to areas they were pushed out of due to the impact of possums. We hope to see more and more species return, and for new species to discover the Peninsula's prime habitat.

Return of the Kererū

While speaking with the team about the best way to remove rats from her property, a Harwood resident expressed her desire to see kererū return to her neighbourhood. These birds had been missing from Harwood for a long time, and the residents were keen to see them return. A few months later, a family of kererū decided that Harwood was a pretty cool spot to live – they had finally returned! With more habitat and food available due to the removal of possums in the area, the Peninsula is able to sustain higher numbers of native birds. Reproduction is more successful due to reduced predation, thus populations increase and are able to spread out more. We get just as excited as our community when we hear about native animals moving to new areas, so please let us know if you have a new feathery neighbour!



Kererū on powerlines. Photo credit: Jenilee Hill

Urban dog sweep



Joe and Soph on Somerville Street in the centre of Sector 5. Photo credit: Marcia Dale

Now that we have removed over 24,000 possums from the Peninsula, what we're left with is a population that has managed to so far avoid capture by any of our current efforts. The possums we have left now are arguably the smartest of the bunch. Things get even more difficult when you have a subpopulation that are street-smart; the tricky urban possums. We're also limited with the types of devices we can use in the residential areas, as we won't install anything that is too risky for pets and children. We thought using firearms wouldn't be feasible, as traditionally most possum shooting is carried out at night with a spotlight, which is not ideal in an urban setting. But luckily for us, we found the perfect duo to help us out with those streetwise urban possums. Joe Hughes from Summit Contracting Limited, along with his possum detection dog Soph, had the precise skills required to get the urban work done safely and efficiently.

Soph is trained to use air and ground scent to track a possum to their den during daylight hours. Once the den is located and Soph knows a possum is close she will let Joe know by barking excitedly. For rural possums who aren't used to being woken up by dogs this has the effect of flushing them out, and if Joe has a safe and clear shot he will dispatch the possum immediately. Frustratingly, our urban possums knew what was best for them and about half of them decided to stay put! We managed to trap one of them by placing traps right next to the den site, but up to three possums remain at large, for now.

The good news is that after 3 days of thorough searching across 70 hectares of prime habitat only 8 possums were detected, and 5 were dispatched. Soph worked twice as hard as Joe, or at least she covered twice as much terrain going back and forth following her highly tuned nose.

In order for Joe and Soph to do their work we first had to obtain permissions from all landowners to allow access with a firearm. We were pleasantly surprised at the high level of support from the residents, with 96% giving us permission to proceed. We plan to do a second sweep through early next year and include additional areas in the southern section of Sector 5.



Area covered by Joe and Soph based on GPS tracking collar. Data supplied by Joe Hughes.

More dogs!

We received a lot of feedback from readers letting us know how much they enjoyed hearing about all the canine volunteers in the last newsletter. We missed out a very important dog in the last edition though, our long time volunteer Tess from Cape Saunders. Paula had a chat with her owner Alex to learn more about what makes a good possum dog. See the interview on the following page:



Tess from Cape Saunders

Cape Saunders Possum Dog – Tess

On a balmy Friday afternoon, I drove out to Cape Saunders Road to visit one of our biggest supporters, Border Collie Tess, and owner Alex. We know that possums like to hang out on cliff faces and venture out when they need a different food source. So, when possums move from the Cape Saunders cliffs to the Cape Saunders Road cribs, perched above Papanui Inlet, Tess's nose and ears start to twitch and she's off, seeking out the intruder. Tess will hunt the possum and hold it until her owner follows and dispatches the possum with his rifle. Since we started recording Tess's possum catches she has caught 12 possums over 2 years. Her owner Alex informs me she has been catching possums since around the age of 1, she is now 8 and has caught more than 30 possums. I wanted to know more about Tess the possum dog, so I asked her owner Alex some questions:

- **Does Tess have other talents?**
- Tess will also hunt and kill stoats. Tess is intelligent and seems to understand many words. Even though Tess is a tough and takes out the most vicious pests, she has a very loving nature, she is gentle and smoochy, even at times sleeps on my bed.
- **What do you think excites Tess about the possum hunt?**
- Tess seems to love the action. She reads the body language and excitement from me and likes the teamwork. She does not get a reward; she just enjoys the experience.
- **If someone wanted to train a possum dog, what tips do you have?**
- It is all about having a good relationship with your dog. I have learnt to let her come to it naturally. For example, you do not need to tell what direction to go or be strict. She has the instincts and it's just about providing the opportunity.
- **Has she ever been injured by a possum or stoat?**
- Not really. She has had a few scratches, but they heal.
- **What do you see as the benefits from having less possums?**
- There is more birdlife and where there is native bush its healthier. It's also good to be part of a community effort and eradication is very plausible.
- **Thank you Tess and Alex, you are an important part of our possum eradication project.**

Do you have a fluffy best friend that catches or detects possums? Be sure to let us know!

Until next time...

Thanks to everyone who has supported our project in ways big and small. Our incredible volunteers have contributed over **16,000 hours** of their own precious time in this year alone.

To all the landowners who let us on their properties to carry out our work, we thank you for your ongoing support.

Happy trapping and please keep sending us your possum sightings, along with any positive changes you are seeing in your neighbourhood.

Have a wonderful holiday season everyone.

Grand Total of Possums Caught = 24,216

Remember to Report a Peninsula Possum possums@opbg.nz *DEAD OR ALIVE!*

Report a Possum now

Feel free to contact our team:

Operations Manager: Paula Cross: operations@opbg.nz

Team Leader Community Engagement: Marcia Dale: guardians@opbg.nz

Community Coordinator: Maggie Evans: peninsula@opbg.nz



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