OTAGO PENINSULA BIODIVERSITY GROUP

Newsletter *Spring 2024*

Welcome to the Spring 2024 edition.

In this newsletter we say goodbye to the majority of our OPBG staff members as we move into a different phase of operations.

Predator Free Dunedin will take on the responsibility of finishing the work we began to eradicate all possums from the Peninsula. We hope you all continue to support their work to get us all past the finish line.

OPBG will be switching its focus to other species, starting with rodent and rabbit work in priority areas.

The possum eradication project all began with a vision from community members of what our land could look like if we all pitched in and did our bit. They saw what was being lost from our natural environment and decided enough was enough. With 15 years of hard work and over 100,000 volunteer hours the residents of Otago Peninsula have reversed trends of decline and we are all now reaping the benefits of seeing particular bird numbers on the rise. Our bird monitoring is showing an increase in tui, bellbird, kereru, fantail, pukeko and rifleman and overall bird abundance is growing.

We will end this edition with an article written in 1910 that details the changes in birdlife that the author noticed over their lifetime on the Otago Peninsula. They were pessimistic about the future, and glumly predicated the extinction of all native birds from these lands. I think they would be more than pleasantly surprised if they could see what we have all achieved so far, and long may the good work continue!

Goodbye to the team

With our Predator Free 2050 funding winding up, we now must say farewell to most of the team that made up the OPBG ground staff. We would like to thank Marcia Dale, Ben McConnell, Lisa Campbell, Maggie Evans and Chris Arnison for all their hard work and heart and soul they have put into the job. We also say goodbye to Jenilee Hill, but then we happily say an immediate hello to her again as she will be carrying on the work of the team under the management of the Halo Project, supported by Predator Free Dunedin.

Team work makes the dream work

Starting on the ground on June 18th, Predator Free Dunedin, OPBG, the Halo Project, and City Sanctuary have been working as one team to get the possum eradication across the line.

Thanks to the hard work of staff and volunteers working together, we have achieved the following:

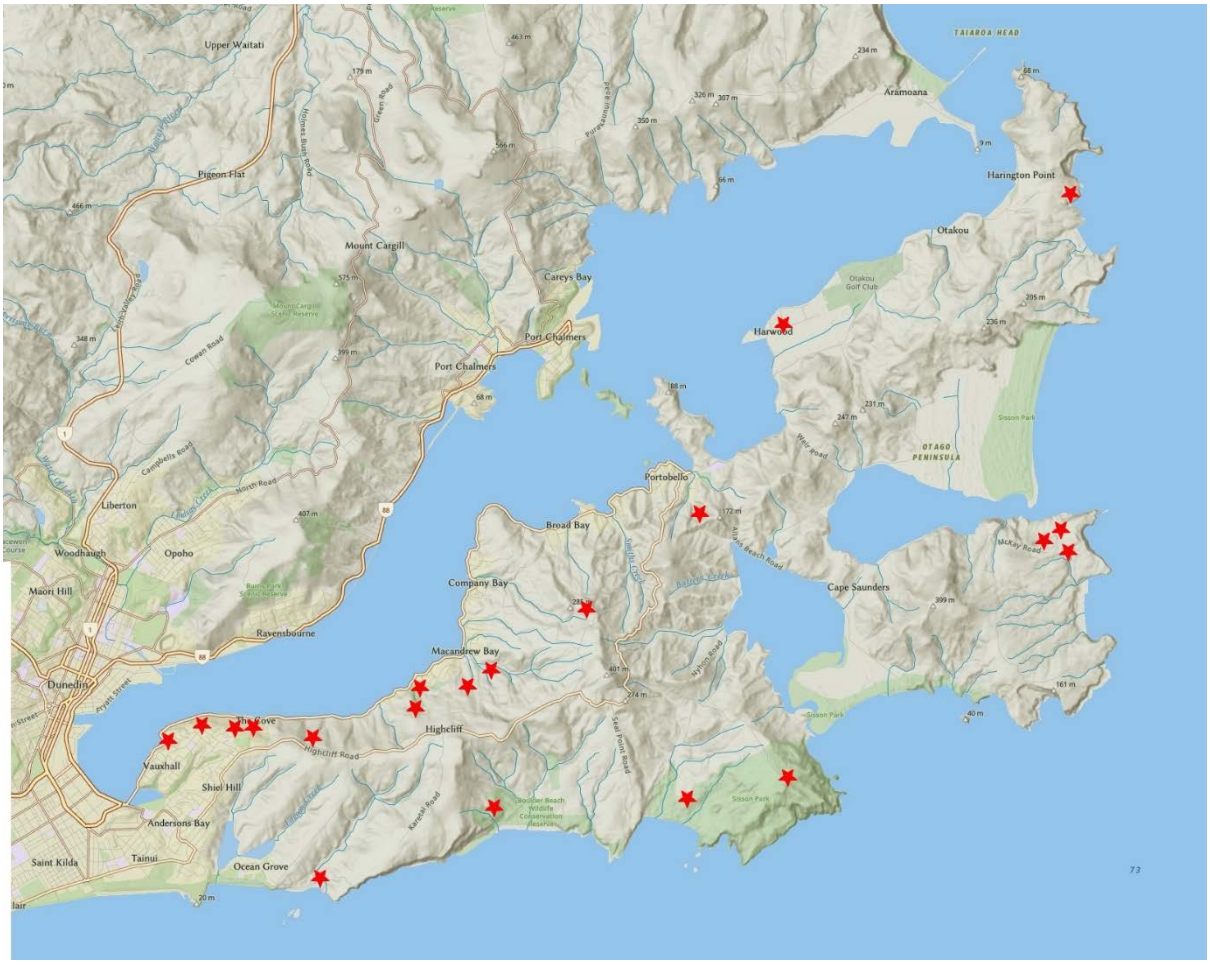
- Removal of 99 possums
- Scat detection dogs have covered large areas (3,000 hectares) looking for signs of possums. Any detections are followed up with a range of tools including hunting dogs and kill traps.
- Drones equipped with thermal cameras were used to look for possums. They confirmed a handful of possums are living on cliff faces in at least three separate locations. Intensive trapping around the edges of cliffs has seen some success but we continue to explore innovative approaches to target these elusive individuals.
- A live detection network has been set up across the outer areas of the Otago Peninsula. This new, high-tech network is solar powered and uses AI, self-resetting AT520 traps to send live updates of any possums that may still be out there, while also removing any that enter the trap. A camera inside the trap takes a photo which goes directly to our team on the ground. This live detection network will let us know if any rogue possums enter the immediate area and will help us to confirm when we are possum free.
- Together with Pest Free Banks Peninsula, an extensive toxin operation was carried out across Sandymount Reserve and Boulder Beach. This area was identified last year by drone surveillance and trail cameras as harbouring a concerning number of possums. We're now confident this population has been knocked down and will continue to monitor and target any remaining animals.

AT520 trap. Photo Credit NZ AutoTraps

State of the Peninsula

Between all the community trappers, the OPBG staff, the wider Predator Free Dunedin staff, and the hundreds of devices activated across the Peninsula we have only caught 8 possums in September Peninsula-wide, which is the lowest monthly catch rate on record. There were 61 possums caught over the same time period last year, with not nearly as much effort put in. Possum numbers are certainly tracking right down and we're confident we will reach zero if we don't give up.

The combined monitoring across the Peninsula is showing roughly 15 locations of interest where possums remain, spread very widely from Sector 5 to almost Taiaroa Head.



Red stars indicate the locations where possums have been detected within approximately the last month.

Peninsula possums will now be behaving differently to what we've experienced so far. In other areas of the country where possum trapping isn't occurring, possums in bush habitat will have a home range of 1 to 4 hectares. In open farmland without forest fragments it can increase to around 30 hectares.

But in situations where possums have been controlled to low densities the males need to travel further to find a mate – some have been recorded as increasing their home range to 160 hectares. Therefore, we should be seeing a lot of movement in the remaining Peninsula possums over the coming months, and that's before we even factor in disruptions caused by the recent slips. Unless they have been displaced by flooding or landslides, we would expect to see any remaining female possums continue to stay localised in their own home territory, while the males will be exploring more and more frantically in their search for a female. We are now right in the thick of the breeding season so the males will be getting desperate! This frustration may lead them to engage in risky behaviours – such as putting their head into a backyard trap, so if you still have a possum trap please keep it freshly baited and set, these next two months could prove quite crucial. If the males are successful in finding a female we would expect them to remain in the vicinity and form small population clusters. The bad news with the possums forming clusters is that if left untouched, over time they could increase their numbers upwards. The good news is that these clusters should be easier to locate and target with control devices.

But as always, we need your help detecting them! Please report all possums seen or heard to www.reportapossum.nz

Guardians wrap up

Marcia Dale held her final meeting as leader of the Guardians group in Sector 5. It shows a lot about the calibre of the volunteers involved that they were all happy to dig into the celebratory dead possum in a timms trap cake! City Sanctuary will be actively involved in the management of the Sector 5 area until June 2025, with an aim to help support the group into transitioning into a self-sustained community-led conservation group.

Nothing says "Thanks for your hard work and commitment" like a dead possum cake.

Next steps for OPBG

The team at OPBG will be down-sizing and shifting away from possum work to focus on rodents, rabbits, and mustelids. In the first instance the work will be undertaken in priority areas based on levels of biodiversity value. Planning for this work will be starting in October alongside applications for funding. The OPBG Predator Free Peninsula website will be updated to include more information. If you are an Otago Peninsula backyard trapper for rodents and rabbits, we will be offering advice and support as we continue our mission of becoming a pest free peninsula. We will also require some volunteers to assist with trap lines in priority areas. If you are on my database as a back yard trapper or volunteer, I will

be in touch about this work during November. If you would like to volunteer or be added to our database, please get in touch. We also require an injection of funding to kick start these operations so if you cannot be hands on with trapping, please consider donating via our website www.predatorfreepeninsula.nz

It is exciting to be starting new projects and I look forward to working with community groups and residents, across the beautiful Otago Peninsula, protecting native taonga species.

Paula Cross

Operations Manager OPBG

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Despite all my rage I am still just a rat in a cage.

The Native Birds of the Otago Peninsula, Past and Present

Content warning – includes references to killing birds that modern readers may find disturbing.

By Aparata Renata.

The fantails were very numerous on the Otago Peninsula in the early days, and frequented cowsheds, stables, and pigsties on account of the flies that were always to be found about these places. They fed entirely on these flies, which they always catch and devour on the wing. They also frequented creek beds, edges of lagoons and the outskirts of bush and scrub. When feeding about lagoons and waterside places they became a feature in the landscape on account of their lively actions while in search of food. They built their nests no great height from the ground. These were constructed of light portions of decayed wood lined with hair and fine fibres inside and moss, cobwebs, and, generally, ribbonwood bark outside. The nests were made very neatly and pointed at the lower end. When there was any bush scrub or trees near a house or shed they were so tame that they entered the houses or sheds daily if windows or doors were left open for them to do so. They are still plentiful about here. A black one and a pied one nest a few yards from the house, and at times take possession of the back yard. I look on the difference in colour as being simply accidental, having nothing to do with age or a distinct species.

Saddlebacks, South Island crows, and native thrushes may have made the Peninsula their home in the past, but for the last 40 years I have not seen any or heard of any being about.

Parrakeets were to be found in great flocks, both the red-heads and the smaller yellow-heads. They did great damage to oat and wheat crops. I have seen bird trappers secure hundreds in their nets in a day in the late sixties. They are extinct as far as the Peninsula is concerned, and have been so here for many years. They were very plentiful in the Longwood forest to my knowledge from 1895 to 1908, for I was living in the heart of it for 13 years. The last year I was there they had disappeared. I attribute this to food becoming scarce. Their food in a natural state was the kernels of seeds. The red and white pines and totaras are mostly sawn out of the Southland forests, and their seed kernels were the principal food of these birds in the larger forests. They were very prolific birds - I have often found eight, nine, or 12 young ones, almost of one age, in a nest. I have never found less than four eggs in one nest. About three years ago I know they were very short of food, as I found them living on the hard seeds of the black pittosporum, or turpentine tree of the settlers. This was the only occasion in my experience when they resorted to these seeds for nourishment.

The kaka, or large parrot, was to be found in great numbers, but as the forest got cleared they took to the high lands and heavily-wooded gullies. As the kaka feeds on grubs, berries, kernels of the miro berry, and honey, it was never short of food. The grubs it dug out of decayed wood by fairly desiccating it to pieces with its powerful beak. I have only seen one about for the last two years. They were killed out very soon by the settlers. In fact, locally, before ferrets and weasels were liberated in New Zealand. The scarcity of the kaka in the Tautuku, Seaward, and Longwood forests now is principally traceable to the imported vermin. As the bird often was obliged to seek its food on decayed fallen logs lying on the ground, it became an easy prey to these deadly enemies. It also often nested in a hollow near the ground or on it at times. In such cases it had a poor chance of rearing its young even if it escaped destruction.

The long-tailed cuckoo and shining cuckoo still visit the place, but in no great numbers. The latter, as formerly, appears here about the middle of October. They were very plentiful at one time. The longtailed cuckoo was never very plentiful, to my knowledge. The native pigeon, always a bird to move about for its food, visited the Peninsula in great flocks. In the days before it was protected by law it was at times almost exterminated. In the late sixties I heard of some being about in a pine bush four miles distant. After a day's search I found two and shot them. From that time till last year I did not see or hear of any about. Then I saw two near Cape Saunders, apparently feeding on the hini-hini berries, which were abnormally plentiful last year. This year I saw one at Papanui Inlet, opposite the site of the wreck of the steamer Victory, feeding on the grass tree berries, which are

plentiful this year. These trees did not bear last year, and the hini-hini (Melicytus) is not bearing berries this season. An unfavourable season for one lot of native trees to bear fruit seems to be quite favourable for other species. As the pigeons had to resort to kowhai buds and leaves and ribbonwood and other leaves for food in those seasons when there were no berries ripe, the destruction of these trees meant their extermination.

Quails, bitterns, woodhens (weka), and herons were not plentiful at any time here. A weka was seen at a basket supple-jack cutter's tent a few months ago close to Papanui Inlet. In discussing the matter with my brother, who saw it, we came to the conclusion that it must have got away from some vessel passing the coast, or else be a very old bird. The former suppositions looks like the solution of the problem of its whence, otherwise it would have been killed by dogs, cats, or weasels, etc., long ago. It is truly a rare avis. The white heron's Maori name stood for rarity. This fact has been well confirmed by Europeans. Very few were to be seen here. The last pair I saw was about 50 years ago and they were perched high up on a totara tree near Macandrew's Bay.

Paradise, grey, and teal ducks were plentiful about the Tomahawk lagoons and the big creeks where they joined the bays and inlets. Their great resort was the raupo (bullrush) surrounded lagoons at the Wickliffe Bay sand flats, where they were to be found in thousands. At low water great flocks of paradise and grey ducks fed on the flats left dry at Hooper's and Papanui Inlets. A few grey ducks come about, but teals and paradise ducks are now a thing of the past here. The swamp turkey, or pukeko, was found only about Tomahawk and the Wickliffe flats and lagoons. It is now extinct here. In dealing with the land birds I must not forget the smallest of them all, the bush wren. It is a miniature woodpecker in form, and has the same habits. When its wings are closed it appears tailless, as the tail is so short as to be then covered. It is called by some the thimble bird, as its body, when plucked, is small enough to be placed in one. These birds were very rare formerly and are now apparently more plentiful. One cannot travel half a mile now without hearing the call of a pair. They are so tiny that they are not easily seen, and they also shift very rapidly in quest of food. In a distance of half a mile here five pairs were to be found last year. They are very tame and apparently inquisitive, as they keep moving about close to anyone remaining quiet for some time. They feed on spiders, grubs, caterpillars, moths, and other insects. In searching for food they move and dart about rapidly, and are always restless. They search bark, leaves, twigs, branches, and crevices about trees for their food. I think they are too quick and active for cats to catch. They build in crevices, holes, corners, and cracks. In the last two years, without looking for them, I have seen five or six of their nests. The first was behind the washing boiler in the washhouse, and was easy to find when the birds were building it. The next was in Glenfalloch barn, between the iron roof and rafter. Then I saw one in my woodheap, and two in the bush about half a mile away. This year a pair built under a sack placed to dry on a cattle-feeding rack in a paddock near a shed. I have a photo of this nest, taken with the sack turned back off it. I took the nest after the two young birds had left it, and have it still. My children found a nest not far from here last year. In a shingle hut at Papanui a pair entered, searched all the crevices about, and then went out under a corner of the gable of the roof. I was told by the owner of the hut that they had a nest under the barge boards. Since then I have often seen them about his hut. Their nest is a heap of fibre filled with feathers, and has an entrance on one side. They are quaint and interesting wee midges of birds.

The sea birds that frequent our coasts and roam over the Pacific Ocean were very plentiful on and about the Peninsula. Gulls, terns, stilts, plovers, snipe, petrels, and oyster catchers were almost always about. Albatross and mollyhawks came about in the autumn when the barracouta was plentiful. The albatross does not tear up its food, but swallows it whole. When one of these birds is killed on the day when they are feeding, a whole barracouta is almost always found in it. No marks of a struggle appear on the fish. The bird digests it on the wing, but at times can be found doing so

resting on the ocean. My first experience was with a bird resting on the ocean with its head folded under its wing. I was at the steer oar and one of my companions was at the bow with a long bone in his hand (a cow or horse bone kept for clubbing large and refractory gropers when caught), and he had instructions to hit the bird's head as it took it from under its wing. As it was sleeping, it did not hear the boat being brought near it, so was stunned and killed easily. When thrown into the boat a fish tail showed in its mouth, and on it being pulled hard we drew out a large barracouta. We were somewhat astonished at this, and told the late Charles Bills about it. He said it was only the usual thing, as they always swallowed the fish they captured whole, and lived on barracouta and mackerel. But the greatest sight of all was the great clouds of sea birds that followed up the shoals of sprats, especially as the shoals struck Seal Point, the most southerly headland of the Peninsula. This point has many deep indentations, causing arms of the sea to go inland, and also has many pools on and about it. When the shoals of sprats strike this point and are followed up by red cod, groper, barracouta, and porpoises in great numbers, they and many red cod become stranded. All the sea birds that frequent our coast are then to be found gorging on these fish. This is a sight never to be forgotten by anyone interested in bird life: the mutton birds, black-backed gulls, mackerel gull, terns, shags of many species, mollyhawks and albatrosses, etc., etc., simply obscure land and water. The fish not stranded keep the coast, and often strand on beaches and other headlands, and the clouds of birds keep in their wake.

The black-backed gull at one time had breeding places at Seal Point, near Mount Charles, on the coast; also at Cape Saunders, Sandy Mount, and near the outlet of Hooper's Inlet, etc., etc. At all these places there were thousands of nests. At the present day a few score build on the Cape Saunders Peninsula and some about the Papanui South Head. As these birds are to be found all over the South Pacific, they cannot be exterminated very easily; in fact, they are increasing. A few thousand can be seen daily at Sawyers' Bay. They have been very plentiful on the coast this year, as the so-called whale-feed crustacean has been about in huge shoals for an unusually long- period lately.

The mackerel gull, which is smaller than the preceding, and has a red bill and red legs, in summer was never as plentiful as the black-back, and only small flocks are now to be seen about Port Chalmers. They did breed in the same places as the other gulls, but I have found no nests for years. Shags of river species were very plentiful, and had rookeries in almost every sheltered bay on the Peninsula coast. At Broad Bay, about the position of the road to Portobello as it goes into Smith's Bay, there were, about 1862-3, large red pine and totara trees with many nests on them. I only know of one rookery now at Papanui Heads, where a few dozen breed. A few eggs were taken by my sons from these nests last season. Rough-faced shag, spotted shag, and crested shag were common, but are now practically extinct here. Mutton birds were very numerous, and they bred in hundreds of thousands from Tomahawk Cliffs, along the steeps of Highcliff (which is 800 ft high), about Seal Point, Sandfly Bay, Sandymount, Cape Saunders, Papanui Inlet, and as far as Pipi Kariti, near Otago Heads. The sandy soil about Sandymount was their favourite breeding ground. A few still breed there. My companions and I did not, when on our excursions, eat the young birds, but we looked on their eggs as a delicacy, and I am still prepared to think they are so, as we had a good choice of wild birds' eggs, and preferred the mutton bird egg to any, even to hens' eggs. Each bird laid only one egg, a little larger than that of a duck's. The stoats, weasels, ferrets, and polecats destroy these birds by thousands. Two breeding places along the coast, past Catlins, were often visited by me in 1893, and I frequently found these birds just killed by dozens lying about these breeding grounds, and I have seen these vermin decamping when disturbed there. As the mutton bird roams over such an extent of ocean in the Southern Hemisphere, and breeds on so many thousands of islands about New Zealand, Tasmania, and the Antarctic Ocean, it might be supposed that their numbers could

not be diminished; but the flocks about the coast here are certainly nothing to what they were a quarter of a century ago. When one takes into account the fact that on the coasts accessible in the southern seas they are annually killed in millions it is quite certain that they must be diminishing, as when not molested they only rear one young bird annually. This indicates that it is only a matter of time before they are entirely exterminated about here and Tasmania.

The sea swallow, the most graceful of all the terns, was plentiful formerly, and laid its eggs on the bare rock on isolated rocks and rocky headlands on all the ocean aspects of the Peninsula. I have taken as many as 80 eggs off a small rock about 15ft by 12ft square. A few score laid near Cape Saunders this season, and no doubt some of the rocks about had a few breeding on them.

The redbill, or so-called oyster-catcher, used to frequent beaches at high and half tide and then at low water wade about sandbanks. It fed on small bivalves thrown up by heavy seas on the beaches and on the long pipi cockle at low tide. It has a narrow, wedge-like bill 3in long and pointed to a flat shape. It uses this to open bivalves. It would strike a pipi when slightly open, cut the strong, muscular part that held the valves together, and eat the shellfish at its leisure. When shot while feeding their crops were always found to be full of these tasty shellfish. I have never known them to eat oysters, although it is very likely they do so when other shellfish are not procurable. Practically they are extinct here now.

The penguins were well represented. The crested, royal, and small blue one had regular breeding places on the coast. Their main breeding place was on the south-east end of the Mount Charles Peninsula, in the forest. Twenty years ago they were to be found at this place in thousands. Now only a few score breed in this bush. They had, and still have, regular beaten tracks along and near a small creek. The small blue one is rare now, and all the species will soon disappear from this locality. Dotterels, snipe, gannets, and dove petrels were never plentiful on these beaches, and now are not to be met with.

From what I have written, a summary of the birds that are extinct, nearly so, and increasing goes a long way to prove that all the native bird fauna of the Otago Peninsula is being sadly diminished. Very few species are holding their own, and practically none are increasing locally. The cultivation of the open country, the destruction of bush to carry on farming on good soil, the sawing out of timber trees that bore berries that were the principal food of many of our birds, the devastation caused by extensive forest fires, the increase of stoats, weasels, ferrets, and other imported vermin (and perhaps more will be imported by those who only guess at results) must in the long run mean the extermination of all our native birds. Ocean wanderers will hold out longest, but even some of these, like the penguin, must soon be a thing of the past. The native grey duck, when thoroughly protected, is about the only bird we can hope to see as plentiful as formerly in special localities.

The passing generation misses a lot of our beautiful birds, but the rising one cannot feel the want of their presence so keenly. It is to be hoped that both will find something of an interesting nature in the above sketch.

Credit: This article was originally published in issue 2943 of the Otago Witness, 10th August 1910 and can be found at https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/OW19100810.2.262. We acknowledge the National Library of New Zealand as the source of the article.

Grand Total of Possums Caught = 24,688

Remember to Report a Peninsula Possum
DEAD OR ALIVE!

Report a Possum now

For any questions feel free to contact:

Operations Manager: Paula Cross: operations@opbg.nz

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