

## Holidays plea to protect our penguins

A call has gone out to help save a much loved native bird which lives among us but which many Waiheke residents and visitors may be unaware of.

Numbers of little blue penguins or kororā are falling on Waiheke and over the busy summer season face the additional threat of visiting pets. Karen Saunders of Native Bird Rescue has seen up close the effect of what she describes as “a man-made warzone” on a range of birdlife but says the little blue penguins suffer more than most because of where they live - sometimes in the most surprising places.

“So many people don’t realise that our kororā, our little blue penguins, live amongst us,” she says.

“If you live in rocky area near the coast, even high up, for example in Rocky Bay, Matiatia, Headlands, Oneroa, Sandy Bay, Enclosure Bay, Palm Beach or Onetangi, you are living in little blue penguin habitat.

“They live on land and most days go to sea to find food, they leave in the early hours of the morning, pre-dawn, to forage and hunt down fish to feed themselves and their young. They return after dusk or late into the night.”

Because their natural habitat for building burrows is also shrinking, Karen says these ingenious little birds are travelling further inland (one recent expedition involved helping birds who had taken up residence



These little blue penguins had taken up residence Queens Drive, around 50 metres above sea level and a long, long waddle away from the beach. Karen Saunders says the distances they can travel and the cliffs or hills they scale to get home every day “is phenomenal”. Photos Hue Ross

in Queens Drive, about 50 metres above sea level) and using man-made structures for shelter.

“Doing wildlife rehabilitation, you soon realise that they live in a man-made war zone. We have taken over and developed their land, have brought our pets, and other predators into their territory. They have run out of safe burrows to live in so have resorted to living under our homes, sheds, boats and kayaks, anywhere they feel they will be safest from predators gaining entry.

“They run the risk of injury or death from dogs, cats and stoats every time they go from home to the work of fishing for food. Even in their own homes they face injury and death from the predators that can fit in.”

Adding to the threat is the fact that a adult little blue penguins will next month come into their annual moult - the time when they shed and regrow their feathers.

“They grow new feathers and lose all of their old feathers in one go,” Karen says.

### ‘Once they’re gone, they’re gone’

Safeguarding the much-loved little blue penguins around the Hauraki Gulf is made more complex by the birds’ stubborn homing instinct to their own burrows.

Karen Saunders says she and her volunteers work hard to find solutions for birdlife displaced by development around the coast and warned those who come across little blue penguin burrows that they are legally obliged to safeguard them.

“I recently had a call from a man on the mainland asking us to release our rehabilitated kororā on his property and he would compensate us,” she said. “His family have a large coastal property

but realised the value of their taonga too late. They used to have penguins, but they have all gone as their family holiday home was pet friendly.

“They have put in years of work trapping stoats, reducing rat numbers, planting, installing penguin nesting boxes, and no longer allow any dogs off leash or cats on the property so that the penguins now have a safe environment - but, sadly, I had to explain that, once they are gone, they are gone and it is extremely difficult to get them back.

“Kororā are site faithful and, no matter where you move them, they will return home.

“I have responded to many calls from

property developers and tradespeople where they have moved the penguins only to see them come back. So they approach me to ask me to take them away.

“If you are an owner, developer or builder working in coastal areas please be aware that interfering with our penguins is illegal and the disturbance of any native or endemic species carries a hefty fine.

“Give us a call and in conjunction with Forest and Bird we can work on creating a solution. If you see a penguin on the beach or in the surf close to shore during the day please give us a call on 020 473 9464 as it may be in trouble, it could be injured or starving.”



Karen Saunders has a specially designed swim cage she takes to Oneroa beach so that her rehabilitated kororā can get used to the water again.

"During this time they can't go to sea for food as they are not waterproof. So right now their young are close to finishing fledging so our waters are full of juveniles learning the ropes and adults eating as much as they can to gain loads of weight before their two week enforced time ashore without any food."

As part of her work with Forest and Bird and Native Bird Rescue's Community Wildlife Connection, Karen is keen to spread the word about how little blue penguins live in the Hauraki Gulf. For example, their southern cousins live in colonies whereas Waiheke's resident population are more spread out and live in pairs - something that makes them far more vulnerable.

"Most people are so surprised when I share the story of our kororā and how they live," she says. "So this opportunity to share their story, their fight for survival, is a golden opportunity to create community awareness and hopefully we can grow a group of 'penguin peer supporters', who can share this story with pet owners so they are aware of the damage and death that pets left to roam freely can cause."

"Our community is excelling at predator control, aiming for stoat eradication and pest animal (rat) control is becoming an island wide success story."

"Now it is time for us all to become responsible pet owners. We can do it, we can co-exist with our wild neighbours, we hope that like kākā we can increase our island population of penguins. One of the things you can do is to keep all pets (dogs and cats) indoors or contained at night."

And she has a message for residents and

visitors alike about how to help protect the little blue penguins during the busy holiday season.

"For our penguins and other wildlife it is a time of massively increased risks. If they have survived the local pets and got to know their routines they are suddenly faced with the added stress of visiting dogs," Karen says.

"I know that I will be called out to rescue penguins, kākā, shags, oystercatchers at this time of the year due to dog attacks from holidaying dogs. The owners are mortified and so deeply sorry that their dog has injured and killed wildlife, and I am often told that if they had known they would have kept their dogs under control."

"So as owners or managers of holiday homes or accommodation, you could advise your guests in advance that they are coming to a magical island with abundant wildlife and that it is advised for pets to be monitored, under control, contained or on leash at all times."

"It only takes a second for your dog to grab and shake a penguin in play."

Native Bird Rescue relies on donations to employ wildlife rehabilitation and

environmental specialists and Karen says she currently has enough funds for around four months' operational costs. So she's calling on volunteers or well-wishers to help with time or money to help grow the organisation.

"I have built Native Bird Rescue with passion, determination and perseverance and now is the time for expansion," she says.

"So if you would like to join our successful team of dedicated volunteers we are looking for dynamic, successful achievers to lead our fundraising and administration areas."

"If you are interested in filling vitally important roles as a key benefactor, sponsor or supporter of Native Bird Rescue please contact [karen@nativebirdrescue.nz](mailto:karen@nativebirdrescue.nz). We live in an incredibly wealthy community and would love Native Bird Rescue's free public service rescuing and rehabilitating our wildlife to reflect this."

If you would like to help the penguins, please donate to Native Bird Rescue Charitable Trust 38-9019-0695843-00 or you can go to their website and use PayPal.  
• James Belfield

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