WINDY HILL ROSALIE BAY CATCHMENT TRUST

Windy Hill Sanctuary Newsletter #49 December 2025

Season's greetings

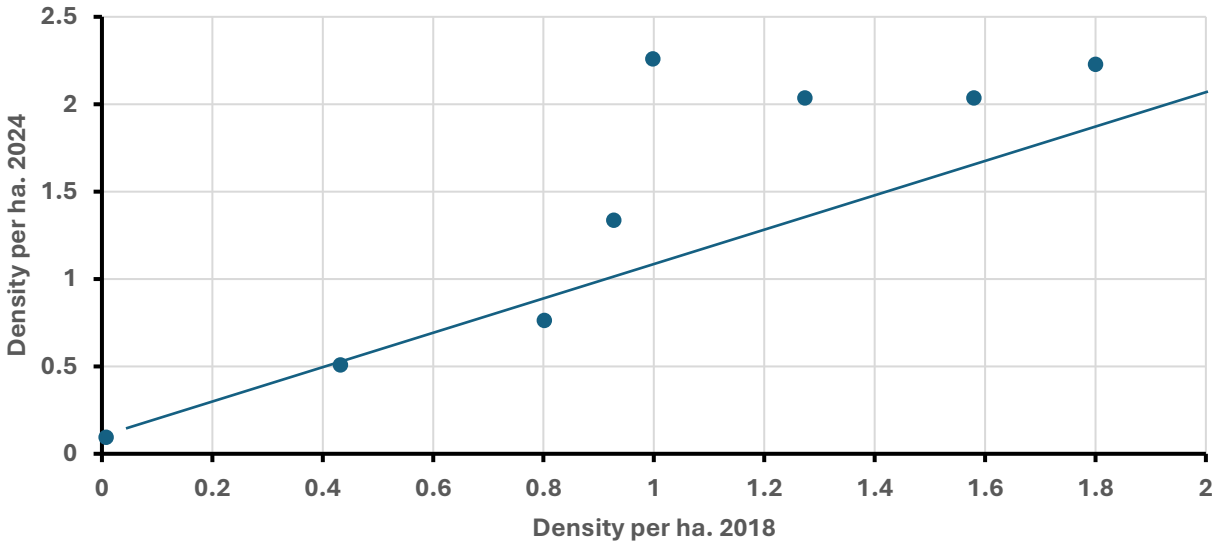
In November we began our 27th year of ecological restoration of the Windy Hill and Rosalie Bay Catchments on Aotea. We estimate we have removed 100,000+ rats from the Windy Hill Sanctuary area over that time. It has taken dedication from our Trustees, admin team, and the over 40 people employed since 1999 on the Sanctuary field team to achieve our goal of sustaining this area of our unique island biodiversity.

So, what's happening with our birds?

When we began, we were primarily focussed on protecting our birds as the island had already lost 12 species. In this newsletter we look at how our birds are faring following the many years of suppressing the pests that ravage their babies, food sources, and habitat.

To be able to track bird's response to reduced pests in the Sanctuary bird monitoring began in 2000 under the supervision of Dr Sam Ferriera then at Department of Conservation, initially quarterly counts then annual. Prof John Ogden took over the supervision and reporting annual counts from 2008. Birds were monitored annually up until 2018 and are now counted every 5 years as the trends for each bird species became clear.

The following graph from John's 2024 report shows an increase in kaka, grey warbler, silvereye, tui, and fantail between 2018 and 2024. This builds on the trends from earlier years.



Average density per hectare for different species in the managed area at Windy Hill in 2018 and 2024. Each point represents a species. From left to right: shining cuckoo, kingfisher, kereru, kaka, grey warbler, silvereye, tui, fantail. The diagonal indicates no change between the years and points above it is a species showing an increase. Each graph point based on 372 counts over the two years.

Birds are recorded as heard or seen at a total of 40 bird count stations established on transects of 4 stations located on ridges or valleys. Each count lasts for 5 minutes and this is repeated 6 times at each station– a comprehensive count occurring on consecutive days in late November/early December, weather permitting. The data from the field is woven into a report comparing counts over time in unmanaged and pest managed areas for each bird species.

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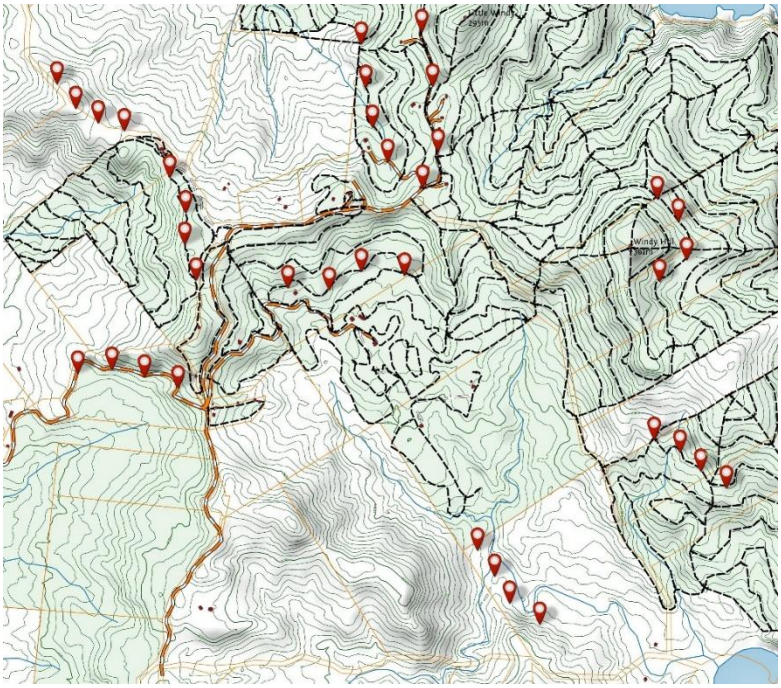
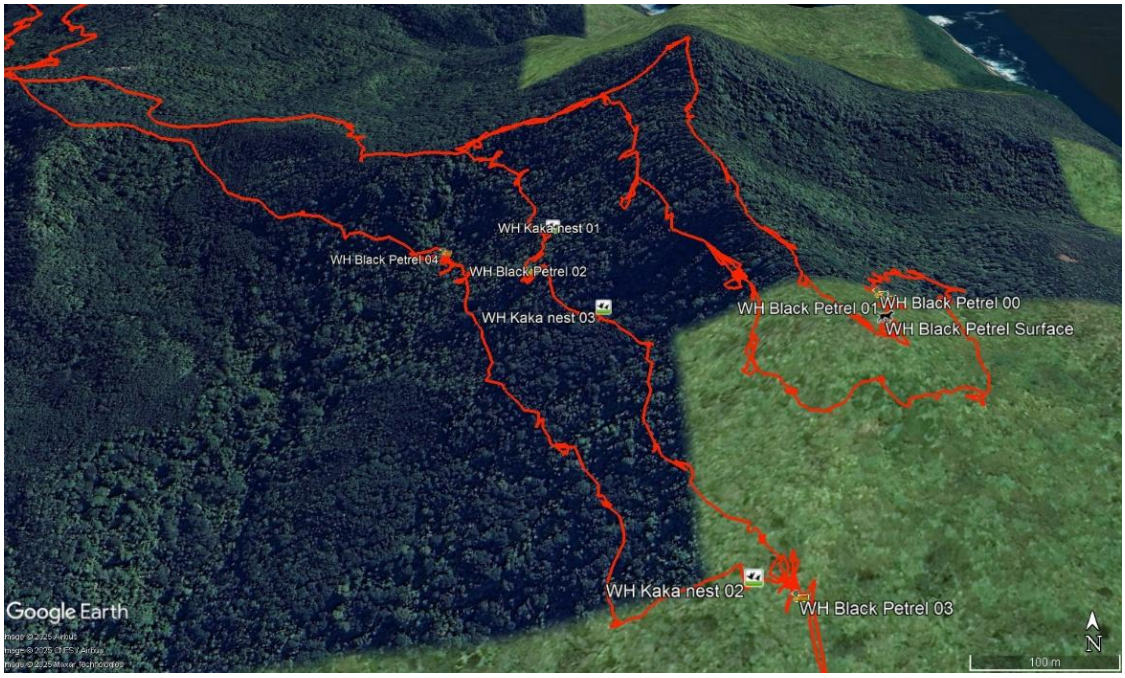


Bird Monitoring stations located on tracks on ridges and valleys both in the managed Sanctuary area and on unmanaged Control areas.

We reported the challenge we had last year with kaka interacting with the Sanctuary bait stations. Changing to a bait pulsing regime of four pulses of one month per annum has significantly decreased the bird's interest in the stations – though they do still like tearing older wooden stations apart! Silvereye catches in our traps has also reduced. We are learning how birds habituate to devices over time in their environment, how we can mitigate that, and are planning for a Master's student to investigate this more fully as it is an issue in some other Sanctuaries, particularly those that have been going for 20+ years.

Seabird surveyor Jo Sim returned to extend her searches for Cooks, Black, and Grey faced petrel burrows in the Sanctuary in November. There are 20+ known black petrel burrows with three more burrows found this survey as well as beautiful glossy black adult found on a track. The map tracks her dog Miro's search on Day 1 of three days.



Pateke flock count monitoring began in February 2025 in coordination with the DOC run island wide pateke counts. A report of pateke monitoring 2000- 2025 was completed this year – pateke in the Benthorn Farm ponds have remained stable over time while they are in decline in other areas on Aotea benefitting from the pest suppression.

Five-minute bird counts were completed in the Sanctuary in December 2025 as part of the Aotea Bird Counts.

Field Team

The field team of Jordan Scarlett, Paul Lee, Corey Hardstaff, Kerryn Johnson (until mid-year), and Liam Clark have successfully held our rats below an 8% RTI over the year, cleared and remarked 20.8kms of tracks, trapped 27 feral cats, and attacked weeds such as bamboo, aristea, and pampas. Feral pigs have been managed by Dean Medland with 39 culled from the Sanctuary this year.

In July, Darren Peters from Trapinator Ltd conducted an independent field audit and concluded "I found this Sanctuary in good heart. It is managed with dedication and passion on all levels and is an outstanding example of community led conservation."

Monitoring

Our monitoring programme continues to expand upon the long-term monitoring of birds, lizards, invertebrates, weta, and freshwater stream species.

- In July 2024 the team created 7 pig monitoring transects within the Sanctuary to measure pig disturbance over time. These lines have now been checked three times - July 2024, January 2025 & July 2025. Pig disturbance is low indicating successful suppression of these animals.
- Five-minute bird counts were completed in the Sanctuary in December 2025 as part of the island wide Aotea Bird Counts.
- The team are monitoring presence/absence of paua slugs, chevron skins, and nesting seabirds in Field maps as well as rare plant species.
- Mrytle Rust – the team are monitoring for the presence of MR on Ramarama trees throughout the Sanctuary.
- Avian Bird Flu – the team is aware of the potential for ABF and have had discussions and information from DOC.

Visitors

In November Marley Ford and Paul Bell-Butler, both master's students, spent a week monitoring lichen and liverworts, with the added benefit of finding rare orchids and a range of other plant species. They were able to add a number of plants species to the Windy Hill botanical list and have updated each plant with its status, ie, at risk, regionally rare, threatened, etc.

A team from Auckland Council came for a Sanctuary site visit also in November – Eru Nathan, Senior Regional Advisor Ecosystems; Bryony Smart, Senior Regional Advisor Flora; Paul Duffy, Team Manager Specialist Advice; and Holly Cox, Senior Regional Advisor Pest Plants; along with Annamarie Clough from the Aotea biodiversity team. The purpose of the visit was for that team to familiarise themselves with this Auckland Council Bio Focus Area and to better understand the depth of the work carried out.

Funding

Auckland Council remains a key support to the Sanctuary with a new three-year funding agreement entered in July. The Aotea Great Barrier Local Board also approved a grant application in May. The last year of a three-year fund from Foundation North will be completed in March and a new application has been prepared.

Thank you to our Sanctuary landowners, our funders, and sponsors, for making this Sanctuary hum.

Aotea / Great Barrier Local Board
Auckland Council
Auckland Council
QEII National Trust
Department of Conservation
Foundation North
Living Simply
Sealink

Scott Macindoe– Education Fund
Phibbs & Co– Pro Bono accounts
Kelvin Floyd – Mapping
Andy Saunders - Website

Merry Xmas to all from

Judy Gilbert

Lou Mack

John Ogden

Deb Badraun

Kiri Toki