

## West Coast Winter Blue Penguin Census – August 2008



Photo by Matt Charteris

Little blue penguin (*Korora - Eudyptula minor*) presence on the West coast was counted recently through the annual census organised by the West Coast Blue Penguin Trust. Twenty-two people volunteered their time to walk beaches on dawn or after dusk to count both tracks left by penguins, and penguins themselves.

Although an informal approach to censusing, these annual surveys are designed to help build a better picture of the scattered penguin population along this significant stretch of coastline. They will compliment and add to distribution surveys carried out by the Trust along the coast, however most importantly they encourage an awareness and enjoyment of these little treasures in our backyard.

### **Summary of results: North - South**

The Northern most survey was carried out along the stretch from Mossy Burn Ck – Kohaihai where 2 tracks were detected. No tracks were seen on Scotts Beach at Karamea.

5 sets of prints were observed on Hector beach, an area where erosion of potential nesting vegetation (flax and small trees) was noted as a concern.

A few people embarked on censusing around Westport. Along the Les Warren Park beach there were no tracks seen near embankment rocks where birds had nested in previous years, nor were prints found along 1.5km of North beach. Two sweeps by different individuals of Carters beach, between Bradshaw Rd and 1.5km West, revealed 2 tracks and 3 penguin sightings.

In Woodpecker Bay (South of Fox River mouth) 17 tracks and 4 adults were counted in the evening, with the surveyors visiting over two consecutive nights.

Along the Truman beaches two surveyors were out and about, with results of 6 tracks along the main beach, an average of 3 pairs heard at the big cave. At the Truman 'half moon cave' guano was sighted, though no birds or tracks were around.

A drop in blue penguin numbers was observed this year at Pahautane Beach, with 10 tracks recorded along the whole beach. The surveyor noted that in previous seasons around 40 have been seen.

Moving South to the mouth of 'New River' near the Westroads yards on Greymouth South beach, 10 tracks were seen, and one nesting box was occupied. Around Kororo beach/mouth of Watson Ck 2 penguins were seen swimming up the creek, however the surveyor suspects there are approximately 3 pairs in this vicinity.

The Guardians of Paroa reported back with GPS waypoints of 75 penguin tracks marked on a map. Although a seemingly high number, this is down on last year's count with the colony still recovering from predation of at least 20 birds by a straying dog.

South of Hau Hau Ck (3 mile, north of Hokitika) 11 penguins were seen, and the concern expressed of significant impact by cattle on vegetation in the blue penguin nesting zone. These breeding areas are currently being demolished by cattle grazing and trampling along the verge of the railway line.

Around Hokitika a surveyor found 15 tracks between Tudor St and the sewage treatment ponds, with the southern most print only 250m from the first motels. The colony along the Hokitika golf course is going strong with 40+ tracks observed. Just north of Boldhead bluff, south of Ross, there were numerous tracks within a 70m length of beach. The latter surveyor commented that this is the first year they have seen prints in this area.

Moving into the lesser populated South Westland, a brave surveyor ventured out to just south of Saltwater Lagoon (seaward from Hari Hari) and observed 17 penguins. Closer to the mouth of the lagoon 12 tracks were counted on a different day.

Between the Waitangirotu (White heron/kotuku colony) and Okarito Lagoon, 37 sets of prints were seen, and 172 between Okarito and the mouth of the Waiho River. It is along this latter stretch of coast that Jasmine Braidwood from Lincoln University is doing a Masters research project on the breeding biology of blue penguin at 3-Mile beach. Another surveyor travelled between the Waitangitona River and south of the Waitangirotu river (Waitahi bluff) and counted an average of 24 prints over 3 days.

The next stop south surveyed was north Gillespies Beach, where no sign was detected. There are also no historical records of blue penguin along this historical gold-mining beach.

Along Kwitchatown, just north of the mighty Haast River mouth, 10 tracks were seen along 2km stretch. A few kms south at Haast Beach, only 2 tracks were seen in an area where there is a known historical colony.

The southern-most census was carried out by the Haast School pupils who detected 18 tracks along a length of beach as long as "2 rugby fields" 😊.

**Threats identified during censusing:**

As with previous years' census results, dog prints surrounding penguin tracks leading to the penguin's nesting and hang out areas were noted (Camerons and Haast Beach).

Erosion caused by natural forces such as big seas was identified in the Hector beach area, where vegetation potentially important for nesting shelter had been washed away.

The area south of Hau Hau Creek (just north of Hokitika) is currently affected by cattle, which are trampling coastal vegetation harbouring nesting birds.

**A huge thank you to all who contributed to this year's winter census!**

**With your support we are improving our understanding and conservation of Blue penguin on the West coast.**

Please get in touch with the WCBPT Coordinator, Karen Mayhew, if you want to discuss any issues, concerns, ideas or observations on Blue penguin.

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