

# West Coast Blue Penguin Census August 2013 Summary of Results



## **Introduction**

The West Coast Blue Penguin Trust would like to thank the 52 volunteers for their efforts to contribute to the eighth annual survey.

The survey took place between 20th and 27th August from Haast Beach to Karamea. The volunteer numbers were down this year due to some miscommunication, but despite this large sections of the coast were still surveyed.

As noted in previous summaries, these surveys are not scientific. Volunteers walk their local stretch of beach and count penguin tracks in the intertidal area and many variables contribute to the number of prints they may be able to record. The results do however provide a great opportunity to be involved and connect with the nature on our doorstep, as well as valuable year on year information about the scattered penguin populations on the West Coast. This information has added weight to the Trust's submissions on resource consent applications and other planning matters.

In total, some 364 sets of penguin prints were counted this year, the largest number of tracks being around Pahautane, Taramakau, Waimea Creek, Hou Hou Creek and Okarito. This number is down from the 550 penguin tracks counted in total last year, however in this summary we have compared numbers from the same sites only. As the sections of beach walked vary from year to year.

## **Summary of Results – North to South**

Note: Where multiple surveys were done along the same length of coastline, the highest number of prints has been used.

### **Buller**

In general numbers were up in the Buller area with 40 penguin tracks counted in 2012 and 49 tracks counted in 2013 in the same survey areas. Stony beaches made it difficult to find tracks and Luana Sutherland from Hector commented that although they heard lots of penguins calling, they only saw 3 sets of prints due to stony ground.

8 out of 24 surveyors sighted dogs and or dog prints and whilst most reported little erosion, some areas saw erosion worsening particularly around Whareatea River to Waimangaroa and Orowatai to Beach Rd.

Between Carters Beach and Cape Foulwind, numbers were down from 24 to 15, numbers at the Cape were down to 1 from 4 in 2012. However there were too many tracks to count exactly at Carters Beach, so there may be more penguins in this area than the numbers show.

One surveyor, Fiona McDonald from the Punakaiki area, observed 3 road deaths in August between Pahautane and Fox River Beach – particularly distressing at this time of year.

Despite this bad news track numbers were up in the Punakaiki area from 12 in 2012 to 37 sets of tracks in 2013.

## **Grey District**

There were 7 surveys carried out in the Grey District and overall penguin numbers were down in areas that can be compared. From 104 penguin tracks sighted in 2012 to 76 penguin tracks in 2013.

The Barrytown Flats saw an increase in the numbers of tracks counted, rising from 8 to 14. However it was noted by Kevin and Brenda Kaye that *“there were two dead seals in the area they surveyed and uncontrolled dogs were seen wandering about near penguin burrows”*. They also commented on the presence of three black sand mining operations in the area.

Camerons was another area where dead seals were observed, and the number of penguin tracks seen between the Taramakau and Mill Creek were down on last year, from 80 to 52.

This area was where the bulk of the tracks were counted for the Grey District. Bill Johnson who surveyed this area also noted that on-going sea erosion was a problem for nesting birds, especially at the new river confluence with the Salt Water lagoon. Heavy erosion was also observed at the southern end of 9 Mile Bay near Rapahoe.

North of Rapahoe at 9 Mile Bay numbers were down from 15 to 5, however this was an area that has seen traditional nesting spots eroded. The surveyor commented that the birds appeared to have moved to the Northern end of the bay and were nesting in rocks.

## **Westland**

There were 27 surveys completed in the Westland District and numbers of tracks sighted were slightly down on 2012 in comparable areas. From 256 tracks identified in 2012 to 239 tracks in 2013.

Erosion is reported along the Hokitika beach and down to Ruatapu, also at Saltwater lagoon, near the Wanganui River mouth. But in other areas such as Doughboy Beach the beach is building back up. Ian and Jack Davidson noted in their survey notes that the 2km of restoration work carried out due to erosion in the Robinsons Rd to Arahura area is starting to vegetate.

Many areas saw an increase in tracks; Waimea Creek went up from 5 to 17 sightings. Tracks from Hou Hou Creek to Richards Drive went from 16 to 25 and the surveyors reported a marked increase between Mananui and Ruatapu with 9 counted in 2012 compared to 21 in 2013.

Okarito retains its large colonies, however numbers are down from 168 in 2012 to 110 in 2013. The reason for this remains a bit of a mystery however, with Ian James of Okarito commenting, *“Quite a drop in numbers again along this prime stretch - 3 Mile. Numbers have gone from 133, 124, to 86 this year. I've no idea why, we had major storms a few months ago but nothing really out of the ordinary. Access for birds is quite good along the*

*beaches. Found a few birds washed up along the beach this year, but fewer than in other years. There are no dog issues in this area. There are just less birds around?"*

Numbers were also down at Waitangitaona from 33 to 14, however difficulties were experienced recording tracks because of pebbly ground.

The Haast area was surveyed by Paul Elwell-Sutton, who reported a drop in sightings from 5 to 2. The tracks were found in the Kwitchatown area, but also noted in this area were dogs, whitebaiters, 4WDs, quad bikes, erosion and diggers (black sand mining). Paul noted in his survey feedback that the most common threats along this stretch of coast were dogs, people, vehicles and stoats.

### **Oyster Catchers and Dotterels**

The number of Variable Oyster Catchers and Dotterels sighted this year increased in comparable areas, from 68 Oyster Catchers in 2012 to 146 in 2013 and 38 Dotterels to 47.

The largest numbers of these birds were seen in the Grey District with the bulk of those on the Barrytown Flats and north of Rapahoe. Numbers start to drop away the further south you go, with no sightings south of Waitangitaona.

There was a large increase in Dotterel numbers between Collins Rd to Jones Creek with numbers rising from 4 to 17 birds, conversely the numbers were down at the nearby Orowaitai River with Oyster Catchers going from 10 to 5 and Dotterels from 15 to 0.

The highest number of Dotterel sightings was between Collins Road to Jones creek – 17 birds, and Taramakau to Mill Creek – 12 birds.

The Hokitika Beach saw an increase in Oyster Catchers from 2 sighted in 2012 to 11 in 2013.

### **Conclusion**

It seems clear that weather and sea conditions and earlier erosion directly affect penguin activity. However, it is also clear that unknown variables affect the daily decisions of penguins to spend longer than a day at sea or longer than a night on shore. Although most penguins will not risk being on the beach during daylight if at all possible, it seems that some are taking that risk, leaving the shore well after sunrise.

The census provides a hugely valuable picture of the probable presence or absence of little blue penguins on the West Coast and contributes to our understanding of the birds. It also affords a simple and enjoyable opportunity for interested people to get to know their beach and share their experience with others.

The Trust builds on its knowledge through the census as well as a mortality database and on-going nest monitoring. A foraging study will be implemented soon to further our understanding of the habits of the penguins and of the threats to their survival at sea.

In the meantime, a big thank you to all those who took part! Please share your experience with others and encourage more to get to know their local beach and of course to keep their dogs under control and to drive with care close to the coast.