

Our little blue neighbours

Spring is here and, if you live in the capital, you may be lucky enough to spot a baby penguin, thanks to the efforts of volunteers who maintain nesting boxes along Wellington Harbour's rocky shorelines and islands. **Sandy Winterton** reports.

As dusk arrives in early winter, strange noises can be heard all along Wellington's shorelines. In May or June, as darkness falls, little penguins (until recently known as little blue penguins) start coming ashore to find mates and look for nest sites. Their raucous calls from between rocks can surprise people out for a stroll round the harbour's edge on a calm evening.

Places for Penguins is a project run by the Wellington branch of Forest & Bird, which supplies nest boxes to provide safe breeding sites for little penguins. The group has a partnership with Wellington Zoo and has obtained grant funding from Wellington City Council. With this assistance they have installed almost 100 nest boxes and have assisted others with providing nest boxes for Matiu/Somes Island, in Wellington Harbour. The group also undertakes native plant restoration and predator control in nesting areas.

The team at Places for Penguins upgraded their nest box stock last May and installed them in locations likely to attract penguins. Most of the mainland boxes are along the shoreline that stretches from Evans Bay right round the Miramar peninsula and along the south coast. Little

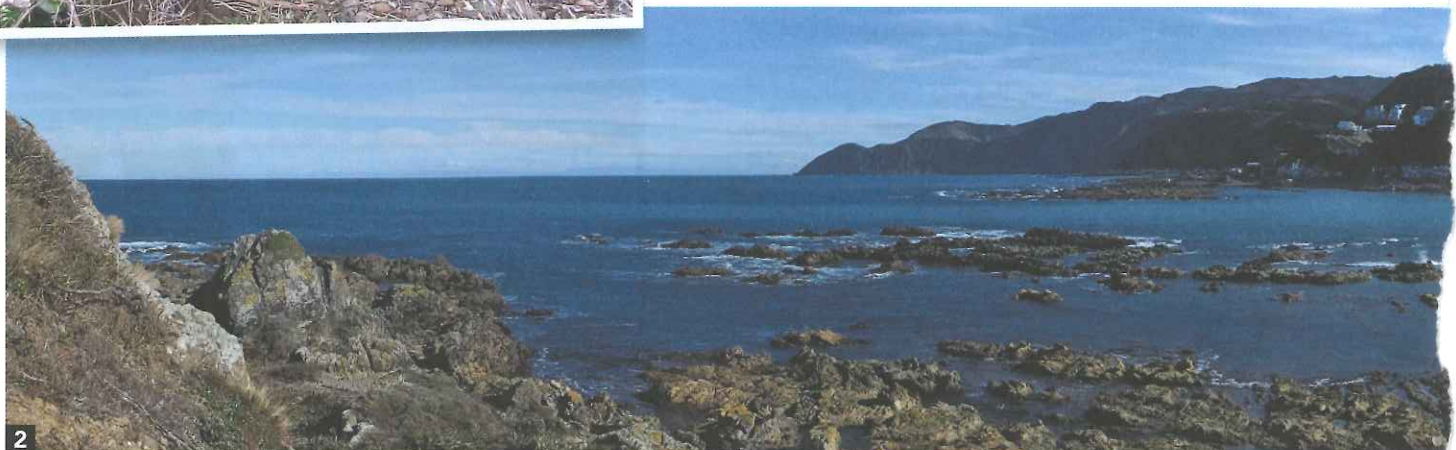
penguins like to nest out of sight under vegetation or in rock crevices, so nest boxes are positioned with this in mind. It helps them feel safe, and prevents the nest boxes overheating on sunny days.

Places for Penguins has trained two dozen volunteers to monitor the nest boxes. Data collected from monitoring provides valuable information about their breeding success. Last year some keen kayakers, including Mayor Celia Wade-Brown, were assigned to monitor Tapu te Ranga island, just off Island Bay.

Tapu te Ranga is a great place for penguins as it's out of reach of dogs, and because pest control has been carried out for several years, there is little or no evidence of rodents such as rats. The island offers good nesting sites, with plenty of bushes and lots of flax. After the breeding season is complete and adult birds have put on weight, they return to shore to moult. Unable to swim for a couple of weeks until their new waterproof feathers have grown, they hole up in a safe place – and the nest boxes are ideal.

The monitoring crews kayak out to the island and work in pairs to check each box. They record information about the visit and the occupancy of the box that is later uploaded to a website for data analysis. The programme started in June 2014 and ran through the year following the penguins' progress through nesting, incubation and rearing chicks.

The Tapu te Ranga monitoring team's first trip was to set the boxes up and a fortnight later, one box was already occupied. Penguins moved into other boxes as the nesting season progressed. Visits were made every two weeks, and volunteers followed careful procedures to ensure they didn't introduce any contamination to the nest boxes or disturb the nesting birds. As spring progressed, chicks hatched and were fed by their parents, and by Christmas most chicks had left the nest box and were fending for themselves.



There can't be many capitals with penguins nesting among the rocks and under the bushes of the shoreline. It's great to have such amazing creatures nesting so close by. If you spot a box – don't open it or do anything that could upset the penguins. If disturbed they could abandon the nest. Dogs should be kept on a leash in penguin nesting areas as they can kill chicks and even adult birds.

Places for Penguins also does beach clean-ups, weeding, planting penguin habitat, predator trapping as well as penguin nest monitoring. To find out more, or to volunteer, contact Forest & Bird, or email placesforpenguins@gmail.com



- 1 A penguin nest box tucked away under a bush. Photo: Sandy Winterton.
- 2 View from Tapu te Ranga island looking back to shore with Island Bay on the right. Photo: Sandy Winterton.
- 3 Little blue penguin. Photo: Craig McKenzie.
- 4 Wellington Mayor Celia Wade Brown and Nigel Roberts monitoring on Tapu te Ranga island. Photo: Sandy Winterton.



Amazing facts about...

THE OTAGO SKINK

Photo: Carey Knox/EcoGecko

By Michelle Harnett

Sunbathing surrounded by snow and ice doesn't sound pleasant but it's something the Otago skink (*Oligosoma ottagense*) does at every opportunity. When you're a reptile living in Central Otago in mid-winter, you need every degree of heat you can get.

Otago skinks/mokomoko grow up to 30cm long. They have dark skins marked with grey, green or yellowish blotches. Their mottled appearance is perfect camouflage for living on lichen-covered schist outcrops, where they can sun themselves by day and hide away in deep crevices at night.

They eat a varied diet, including invertebrates like beetles and blow flies, vegetation and fruit. Most of their food is found close to home, but they do forage further afield, especially for fruit, which they rely on over summer. The orange fruit of patotara (*Leucopogon fraseri*) and the whitish, late summer fruits of *Coprosma dumosa* are favourites.

Summer is also when baby skinks are born. Two to six babies make up a 'lizard litter'. Otago skinks emerge alive, head first, and hit the ground running. They grow slowly and take three to four years to reach maturity after which they have been known to live up to 12 more years in the wild.

Factors like slow growth, low reproduction rate and longevity may be adaptations that help the skinks survive in an extreme environment but they also make them vulnerable. Habitat loss – the skink is now only known in about eight percent of its former range – and the very real possibility of being eaten by introduced predators means they are endangered. The Department of Conservation estimates the population to be only about 2,000–5,000 animals.

Recovery programmes have concentrated on identifying the causes of decline, habitat protection and controlling predators. Otago skink numbers are increasing inside fenced, predator-free areas, and in areas where predator control has been carried out.

*DOC welcomes reports of sightings of the Otago skink. Take a photo, note down a GPS location and contribute to recovery of an amazing animal.