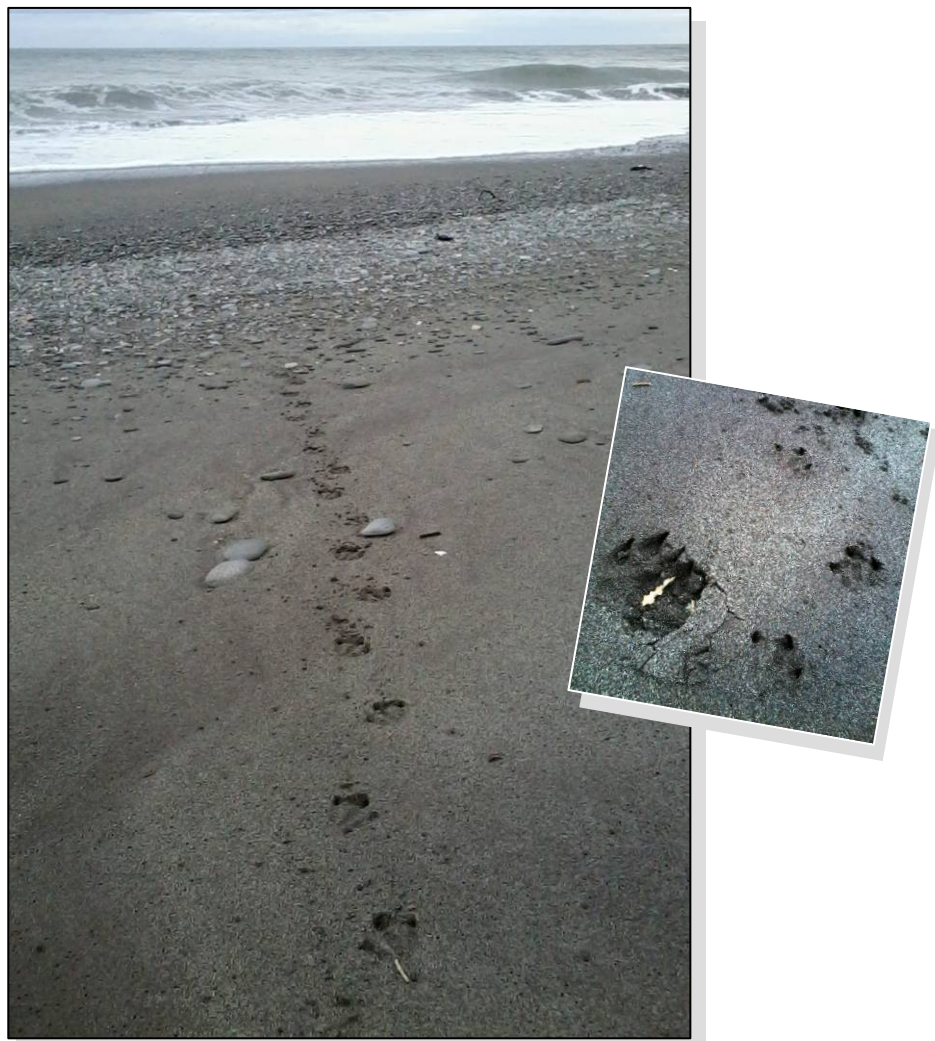




West Coast Blue Penguin Census August 2012

Summary of results



Introduction

The West Coast Blue Penguin Trust would like to thank the 62 volunteers for their efforts to contribute to the seventh annual survey.

The survey took place between 1st and 5th August from Haast Beach to Karamea. This is the first time a survey has taken place in Karamea so a special thank you to the team there, and, although the number of volunteers was slightly down on last year's record high, the survey reached more parts of the coast than before.

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 550 sets of penguin prints were counted this year, the largest colonies being around Carters Beach, Charleston, Punakaiki, Paroa and Okarito.

Summary of Results – North to South

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

Buller

As mentioned, Karamea beaches were surveyed for the first time this year. Disappointingly for the group, no penguin prints were seen. Local advice is that penguins have been seen in the past few years and sadly two were reported killed on a road two years ago.

From Mokihinui to Westport, prints were rare with a report that high seas had washed away a nesting site used last season. At Fairdown, numbers were down from 4 to 2. Special thanks go to the Buller Conservation Volunteers for their efforts around and to the north of Westport.

Between Carters Beach and Cape Foulwind, high numbers were recorded again with 23 between Thomas and Bull Creek. On this particular stretch, repeated counts on 4 different days found only 2 or 4 sets on the other days, despite unchanged weather and sea conditions. At Siberia Bay beside Cape Foulwind 4 sets were recorded compared to 1 last year, which is both remarkable and reassuring after the massacre by a dog or dogs in June.

From Tauranga along Nine Mile Beach numbers were up from 6 to 15 in one survey and down from 6 to 0 in another, again indicating that the survey is not foolproof and is only indicative. The volunteer who reported zero this year also noted that prints are usually seen every day, they were simply absent on the day of his survey. Coastal erosion was also reported at the southern end of Nine Mile Beach.

Trust Ranger, Reuben Lane, has discovered a new colony around the Perfect Strangers Beach area.

Grey District

For three counts around Punakaiki, one was up, another down and the third remained constant, while in Barrytown, 8 sets of prints were found last year and 8 again this year, but all in different places as lots of vegetation has been lost to erosion.

North of Rapahoe, 15 sets were reported, one more than last year but in Cobden, none were found and it is hoped that the proposed Greymouth Breakwater Project will turn this around over the next few years.

Around Paroa, the Guardians of Paroa will be delighted to see that numbers are slowly growing from 28 in 2010, 30 last year and 33 this. South to the Taramakau River, 47 sets of prints were reported, a high number but down from 59 in 2010 and over 100 in 2009.

Westland

One track was reported between the Serpentine River and the Kapitea River at Chesterfield in 2011 up to 6 this year and a remarkable 24 the very next day. From Kapitea to Waimea and from Waimea to Arahura, numbers were down on last year from 11 to 4 and 31 to 5 respectively.

Hokitika Scouts and others combined to cover the area from Arahura to the Hokitika River and reported similar numbers to last year, around 26.

Between the Hokitika Golf Club and Mananui, numbers are down from 14 to 4 with a steep bank caused by continued erosion preventing penguin access for most of this stretch of coast.

On the stretch from Mananui to Ruatapu, 2 sets of prints would have been reported had the volunteers been very early, but it seems that 4 penguins had a lie in that day, leaving after 8am, the prints being counted on the return walk back up the beach.

South of Ross to the mussel beds 2 were counted last year, but no tracks seen this year.

In the Harihari area, numbers remained constant, with 7 tracks last and this year between the Poerua River and the Saltwater Lagoon.

Okarito retains its large colonies, with 124 tracks counted around Three Mile, though down from 133 last year. A bit further south at Five Mile, numbers are fluctuating with 26 in 2010, 48 last year and 22 this year, however stony beaches made counting tricky and stormy sea conditions might have deterred the less courageous penguins. Other Okarito areas were also tricky to count being more stony than usual.

From Okarito almost to Haast, there was a gaping hole in the survey, so an appeal will go out for next year to residents of Gillespies Beach, Bruce Bay and the Wilderness Lodge to participate.

The coast from Waita River to Haast Beach was covered by an intrepid Haast team, though only 5 tracks were found at the northern end of this stretch, worryingly amid cattle and quad bike tracks.

Oyster Catchers and Dotterels

Oyster catchers were reported from Karamea to Haast in generally small numbers of 2, 3 or 4. However 7 were reported at Okari, 10 at Fairdown and 30 near Barrytown. Last year's high of 50 near Harihari was not repeated with 7 seen this year.

Dotterels were also seen between Karamea and Haast, but with many fewer sightings. 5 were seen at Karamea, 4 at Waimangaroa, 15 at North Beach and up to 6 around Barrytown. Up to 5 were reported between the Serpentine and Waimea Rivers north of Hokitika but up to 37 are regularly reported on the Westland High School sports ground in early mornings! 5 were seen at Ruatapu and 2 at Haast Beach. There were a few more and with a better spread than in 2011.

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 ongoing nest monitoring. It is hoped that a foraging study will be implemented soon to further our understanding of the habits of the penguins and of the threats to their survival.

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

Post Script

Do you enjoy numbers and spreadsheets? Do you have time on your hands?! We have seven years worth of census results but comparison is tricky! If you would like to take the task on for the Trust, we would welcome your help! We'd like to look at any patterns and trends and perhaps link that to our mortality database. If you can help, please contact the Trust's Co-ordinator on info@bluepenguin.co.nz.