

Dotterels

While the MIRO banded dotterel/tūturiwhatu volunteers are out on a bird monitor or banding trip, we get asked several questions about the birds by interested people, so this article will try and answer some of the more common questions as we celebrate the end of the 2022-2023 breeding season.

What is the conservation status of the banded dotterel? The banded dotterel has the same endangered status as the whio/blue duck and giant Spotted kiwi, nationally vulnerable, in decline. Unfortunately, the dotterels do not have anything close to the funding the whio and spotted kiwi have so the dotterel survival relies on volunteer groups such as MIRO.

Why do you flag/band the banded dotterels? As part of our high impact permit, we wanted to find out what are the survival rates during breeding, what are the principal wintering sites for these local birds, what proportion of locally fledged birds return to the three monitored sites, what proportion of adults return to the same breeding sites each year etc. Without banding, we would not be able to identify individual birds and therefore answer these questions.

When and where do the birds go in winter? At the end of the season, birds from all three breeding areas head to Lake Kohangatera where we counted 100 individuals on the 3rd of March. Once they fatten up, the birds leave the area for their winter sites. They have been seen at Lake Wairarapa, Pauatahanui, Peka Peka and the south end of the Wellington runway, so not far from their breeding areas. The one exception is a male flagged PAP who has flown to New Caledonia three years in a row to feed at an abandoned shrimp farm. He returns to the Eastbourne foreshore to mate with the same female PEY within 10 metres of previous years nests sites. We have banded over 130 birds, but have only identified where 5 of them go, so where the rest go is still a mystery.

How do you catch and band the birds? We catch the adults while they are sitting on the nest using a funnel trap placed on top of the nest. The trap works like a crayfish pot, it has a small entrance that the birds find hard to exit. We had one very smart female at Baring who would happily escape from the trap each time we tried to catch her much to the frustration of the banders. We catch chicks by chasing them using a net that looks like a butterfly net. The chicks can move very quickly, so it is great to have some young and fast volunteers to help chase them down. Our banders are all DOC approved to catch, handle and band both adults and chicks.

What is the nesting cycle of the birds? The birds start arriving in June and mark out their territories. The first nests appear in August and end nesting in February. Chicks are born within 28 days of the eggs being laid and they fledge (fly) 35 to 40 days after hatching. The chicks are off the nest within 2 days and feeding themselves while their parents watch closely. Sometimes chicks would be seen by the Eastbourne Services Club as wayward chicks wander out of the breeding area.

What is the survival rate and main threats of these local birds? We identified that the main threat is the eggs being eaten by predators, the second is a large southerly swell washing nests away at the lakes and Baring, and the third was human disturbance especially at Eastbourne. With intensive trapping by GWRC, MIRO, ERAT, HEM and Friends of Baring Head, signage, temporary and permanent fencing, and a rahui placed by Taranaki Whanui at the lakes and Baring, we have taken nesting success from 3% to 56% at the lakes and Baring Head. Unfortunately, at Eastbourne domestic cats have again been recorded eating the eggs so our success is much lower.

In the 2022-2023 season the results were Baring Head 11 nests producing 6 fledglings, Lake Kohangapiripiri and the lighthouse 12 nests producing 6 fledglings and Eastbourne 11 nests with only 1 fledgling. Our goal is 1 fledgling per 2 nests but having just 1 fledgling is still a success. If you are interested in helping our trapping or monitoring efforts, please email info@miro.org.nz. To be a monitoring volunteer, all you need is patience, binoculars, and the ability to slowly walk around 2 km.

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Photo of male tending nest - credit - Eric Berger