

Friends of Lord Howe Island

Newsletter No.49

Spring 2019



The June 2019 weeding ecotour was a milestone for Friends of LHI – to be actually on the Island when the rodent eradication was taking place. The Friends group, through the newsletter, has followed the progress from the beginning of the feasibility study in 2001. Many of those who came on the June 2019 week came especially to witness the rodent eradication program.

In all, twenty-four Friends were on this trip; Lee Courtwood, Gwenda Lister, Patricia Evans, Robert Pallin, Nancy Pallin, Pamela Campbell, Bevan Allchurch, Jann Allchurch, Terry Kershaw, Catherine Kershaw, Stephen Gye, Jane Gye, John Pemble, Ian Sinclair, Anne Pickles, Anne Perry, Janet Greenfield, Annie Hawker, David Scott, Gail Scott, Jeannie Davidson, Stephen Ranft, Robert Coenraads, Francheska Coenraads. (visitor from NZ Kwong Nui Sim joined the group for a few activities, including the North Bay day)



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Friends successful in grant application

Sue Bower and Ian Hutton successfully bid for a community Landcare grant of \$17,950 through the Local Land Services Stakeholder Partnerships - for the delivery of the North Coast Regional Strategic Weed Management Plan 2017-2022 including the LHI Weed Management Strategy. This is to continue weed eradication on leases and in the settlement area of Lord Howe Island. The grant will be used to purchase equipment, cover travel costs and employ workers to assist with weed eradication programs on leases.

June 2019 Weed ecotour report

This was a great week to celebrate the start of the rodent eradication program, and continue the Friends long-standing efforts in eradicating weeds from the island.

There was much excitement as the Dash 8 landed in the afternoon at Lord Howe Island, to see helicopters flying in and out, carrying the buckets of baits underneath to spread on mountain and cliff areas of the island – an affirmation that the program was a reality. This exciting start to the week buoyed the mood for the group through the next seven days.

Accommodation for this week was at Oceanview, and this was a first for the Friends trips as a new place to sample. And we were not disappointed, as the hosts made the whole group very welcome for the stay. The rooms were very spacious and neat, the grounds immaculate. The group made use of the well equipped BBQs on several occasions, and the lounge area was an excellent meeting room for talks and get togethers. One evening the manager of the helicopter operations for the rodent eradication program, Keith Springer, came down and gave a very interesting presentation on Rodent eradication programs around the sub Antarctic islands, including Macquarie and Campbell Islands. On another evening the Project Manager Andrew Walsh gave a presentation on the Lord Howe Island Rodent Eradication program and its detail.

The group had made itself available for any duties that they could contribute to the rodent eradication program. This offer was taken up on several occasions. Group members took up duties manning the entrance to some of the walking tracks when the helicopters were flying with baits dropping, to explain to any visitors that the tracks were temporarily closed for the day. Other duties included searching a few



Excitement upon arrival to see helicopters



Keith Springer lecturing at Oceanview



Hospitality at Oceanview



areas on the edge of the settlement, such as Blinkie Beach and Mosely park, for any stray pellets that may have fallen there from the aerial bait buckets due to winds. The Project manager was very appreciative of the volunteers for this help, as there were so many activities involved with the program and all staff were fully stretched on many occasions.

The group did also get some weeding in. A favourite of course was the maintenance morning at Edie's Glen. It is so good to see the native plants reclaim the whole area, following some 15 years of continual effort by the Friends. As the canopy of native plants closes over, the shade is inhibiting the establishment of the secondary weeds such as thistle, fleabane and cobblers' pegs.

A newly started project has been the removal of the garden escape Sweet pea infestation at Blinkie Beach. And the group gave a very good follow up over the area on the headland, off the track patch.

Another new project has been the removal of Coastal morning glory from North Head above New Gulch. In 2018 the Friends group tackled this and the treatment method we trialled is working well. Of course, a favourite part of the North Bay day is the BBQ, and for this one we had a very large kingfish for the BBQ, as well as the local sausages and the fresh salads prepared on the spot by our group members. What an enjoyable day taking an easy afternoon after the trek onto North Head and some pretty vigorous weeding there.

The group also split into a few smaller groups and carried out some eradication projects on leases – at Thornleigh Farm removing Monstera and other garden vines. Also Stephen Ranft, David and Gail Scott made a great effort climbing ladders, and trimming all dead palm fronds from around the Museum.



Picking up stray bait pellets



North Bay bbq



North Head morning glory team



As part of the Rodent Eradication project, 230 Woodhens and 120 Currawongs were caught and are being held in care on the Island by staff from the Taronga Park Zoo. The cages are generally off-limits for any visitors, but as an appreciation for the Friends great contribution to the Island, the Taronga project team manager Michael Shields, gave the group a short tour of facility. This include a look at the food preparation area, and some of the group even sampled the Currawong food!

At various spare moments a few people made excursions onto Lagoon Beach and made a sweep from North to south to remove any Sea spurge plants that had emerged.

A small group of the Friends helped by doing a search-and-find bird walk around Muttonbird Point, and went on to Boat harbour and enjoyed lunch there.

We did get a nice sunny day and low tide for the rock pool exploration down at Ned's Beach. This walk is one of the favourite activities enjoyed by every group. All those creatures that make their home there and all have their own unique story of survival, eating but also avoiding being eaten by some other creature.

On the last evening for the week, the LHI Board CEO Peter Adams and his wife Jeanine hosted drinks and nibbles at Government House. Peter thanked all the weeders for their ongoing weeding efforts and the support over many years for the rodent eradication program. Peter reflected on the long history (25 years) of Friends volunteer weeding and how important this continuity of support is for the Island, both the physical removal of the weeds, but also the moral support for the programs run by the Board.



Sweet pea patch - before and after



Update on the Rodent Eradication project.

Baits stations went out across the settlement in April, with a ground crew of about 50, placing the stations every 10 metres on the ground. (equating to about 19,000 bait stations). These were placed very accurately using gps units to an accuracy of about 10 cm. Then smaller bait stations for mice were installed inside all building on the island . The next task was to catch 230 Woodhens and 120 Currawongs. National Parks and LHI Board staff carried out the catching, and they collected birds from across the Island, including the summit of Mounts Lidgbird and Gower, and on Big Slope. The helicopters were used to ferry the catchers into these remote spots and then ferry the Woodhens down to the airfield for transport to the facilities being run by Taronga Zoo staff. The first point for birds as they were handed over to Zoo staff was the research station where Taronga Zoo chief vet and nurse gave every bird a thorough health check. Then the birds were placed in the cages specially designed by Zoo staff for holding these two species. Currawongs were placed in their pairs in individual cages. The Woodhens were placed in large enclosures with 20 birds to an enclosure. This had been determined with Wekas in New Zealand as an ideal way to hold rails in captivity for long periods, as they lose their territorial aggression in this situation. The Taronga Zoo nutritionist has worked on a special diet for each species.



Taronga Zoo vet Frances Hulst and nurse giving a Currawong its health check



Michael Shields with the Captive Woodhens

With the birds safely in care, the next step was to place baits in the bait stations. This happened in late May, and for some of the paddock areas adjacent to the mountain and forest areas, staff hand broadcast baits, walking lines on the ten-metre grid too. For some cattle owners who wanted to retain cattle on the Island, wooden rooves were placed over each bait station in those paddocks. When the baits had been put out in these lowland areas the time was to then wait for the window of weather to fly and distribute baits in the areas away from the settlement by helicopter. This was tricky as the weather windows were quite tight – wind less than 15 knots, no low cloud and with a forecast for the following three days to allow less than 5 mm of rain. Added to the weather, another compounding factor was the presence of Providence petrels around the southern mountains. These birds fly out to sea before dawn, but begin to return around midday. Spotters were in the mountains to observe Providence petrel numbers returning and alert the operations manager to significant numbers present that may pose a hazard to the helicopters. But the windows for the flights came, and two bait drops were carried out in June and again in July. There was great relief with the accomplishment of this, as weather in winter can be windy and wet.



bait stations being filled



hand broadcast baits in paddocks



smaller bait stations in buildings

But it wasn't over with these helicopter flights – the ground baiting had to continue, with weekly checks of baits stations ongoing until the end of October. At a number of baits stations there were indicators put out to attract rodents and record activity (wax blocks with peanut butter). When any signs of rodents, or reports of them by residents, was observed then the Board dog handlers came around with the dogs trained to detect rodents. Slowly the number of sightings and signs has decreased, and no live rodents have been detected since September 23.



The helicopters spread baits across the southern mountains, Transit Hill and the north hills in two drops - one in June and one in July.

The captive Currawongs have been released and are doing well, showing signs of breeding behaviour. And Leon, who has been feeding Currawongs sultanas at his house for ten years, is reporting more Currawongs than ever; so, all is well with the birds. It is planned to release the Woodhens at the end of November. In conjunction with the rodent eradication there has been an eradication program for Masked owls. Most of the owls have succumbed to secondary poisoning and a contract team have been on the island, in the mountains to remove the

last of these. It is essential to remove all owls before the Woodhens are released, as the owls do predate on Woodhens.



Detector dogs searching for rats



releasing the last Currawong

More update in the next newsletter.

Renewable energy project for Lord Howe Island

The Island Board and community have been working for around ten years to introduce renewable energy to the Island. Historically electricity has been produced by diesel generators. This has been very heavily subsidised by the NSW government for many years, to the tune of many hundreds of thousands of dollars annually. Many residents and businesses installed solar electric panels on rooves and the island has achieved 23 percent renewable energy by this means. A Sustainable Energy Work Group has been working with the LHI Board staff and Jacobs Engineering to develop a plan to increase this. The initial plan recommended a combination of two small wind turbines, solar panels in paddock areas and a storage battery. This proposal was to be funded half by the Federal Government under the ARENA scheme, and half as a low interest loan from the NSW Government. At the last passing point, approval by the Federal Environmental minister, the wind turbines were not allowed. The Board staff reworked the proposal and it has been approved so that more solar panels and a larger storage battery can be installed and provide maybe 75 percent renewable energy for the Island. This will be a state-of-the-art solar and battery system to significantly curb its reliance on diesel generators.

The microgrid will provide at least two thirds of the electricity needs for the population of 382 - which allows a maximum of 400 tourists at one time - and drastically reduce its reliance on diesel which is shipped-in and subject to volatility in price and supply. Construction on the hybrid solar and battery system project, which includes more than 1.2 megawatt hours in solar PV and battery storage with a capacity of over 3.2 megawatt hours, will begin early next year and is expected to be completed by June. Through the Australian Renewable Energy Agency, the federal government has provided \$4.5 million towards this \$11.1 million project, which is also supported by the NSW government and the Lord Howe Island Board, responsible for care, control and management of the Island.

Climate Change Awareness Event

On 20 September, to coincide with events around the world, the Lord Howe Island Renewable Energy Work Group ran a public awareness event at the public hall. Chris Murray introduced speakers Peter van Gelderen and Ian Hutton, who gave a powerpoint presentation on how Lord Howe Island is feeling the impact of Climate Change, particularly following the 2018/2019 summer which was the driest and warmest on record.



The last newsletter detailed some of the impacts being seen. And more bad news came in September, when researchers carried out surveys of the endemic McCullochs anemone fish. These fish rely on healthy anemones for their protection. And the anemones depend on small plant-like organisms called zooxanthellae that live in the anemone tissue and provide food to the anemones. Under stress (such as warm water or cold water) the zooxanthellae exit the anemones and they can bleach - just like corals.

Surveys carried out in 2009 and 2012 showed a stable population of anemones and anemone fish at 19 sites in the Lagoon. The September 2019 surveys showed a 41 percent decline in anemones and 44 percent decline in anemone fish. This was most likely a result of the warm water bleaching event in March.



Unusual bird sightings March to September 2019



In August, Ian McCallan spotted a Grey fantail in Stevens reserve, this bird stayed in the area for about a month, but was found dead in a garden.



In September a Willie wagtail was spotted on the edge of the Pinetrees lease by Alison Rowell of Canberra.



On 12th September Harvey Perkins from Canberra spotted two shovellers on the Lagoon near Cobby's Corner.



In July a small boobook owl was found deceased in a paddock at the southern end of the island. It is believed that the bird probably died from secondary poisoning as part of the rodent eradication program. It is believed this owl was a New Zealand bird..



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