

Dotty about dotterels

Tūturiwhatu/New Zealand
dotterel and chick. Photo
Dean Wright

Some beach communities weren't happy when Forest & Bird branches pioneered "dotterel minding" 40 years ago. But volunteer guardians are still the foundations of tūturiwhatu survival, as **Ann Graeme** finds out.

Forty years ago on our northern beaches, there was a little brown and white bird whom nobody noticed. It had tiny speckled chicks who looked like thistledown and drifted across the sand. When they stopped moving, they were invisible. Nobody noticed them either.

New Zealand dotterels/tūturiwhatu used to live on sandy beaches all around the country. But four decades ago, their breeding range had dwindled to the northern beaches of the North Island, extending as far south as Kawhia on the west and the Bay of Plenty on the east.

The birds are fussy about their breeding territories. Most favoured is a sandy spit between the ocean and the estuary or a beach, backed by dunes, where a stream meanders out to sea. There, where the sand hoppers are abundant, they nest in a scrape in the sand. Their three speckled eggs are so perfectly camouflaged that people and horses can trample them – and they do – and vehicles can crush them – and they do that too.

We humans like sandy beaches too. Beach owners, swimmers, fishermen, and children all play in the places the dotterels call home. Disturbed and displaced by people and dogs in the daytime and picked off by predators in the night time, the inconspicuous birds began to disappear from our beaches. In the early 1980s, scarcely more than a thousand birds remained.

In December 1985, Bev Woolley, then secretary of Waikato Forest & Bird, was holidaying with her family on the Coromandel peninsula at Opoutere. She nearly walked on a dotterel nest. Shocked at its vulnerability, Bev realised the nesting birds needed protection. She organised a weekend roster of Forest & Bird volunteers to man a flimsy fence of string and battens strung around the nesting area. This was a good start but it was not enough, so Bev persuaded her branch to fund a student for six weeks over the summer.

This was not a job for the faint-hearted. The elements – the sun and wind – were fierce, and so too were some of the locals. They said it was "their beach". They had always driven their dune buggies and walked their dogs across the spit right here, and they'd never noticed any birds anyway! A man was fined for taking his dog into a fenced area – and for being rude to Bev.

Dogs are the death knell of nesting dotterels. A dog bounding amongst the flotsam and driftwood above the high tide may scare a sitting bird from its nest. The parent birds will try to distract it, swooping down, or pretending to have a broken wing, but in vain. The dog may kill the chicks or break the eggs, while the owner, down at the water's edge, is all unaware.

The Forest & Bird minders persevered, keeping people and dogs away from the nests and monitoring eggs and chicks and fledglings. Then in 1987, the Department of Conservation was established and New Zealand dotterels were given "threatened species" status. Their care became the responsibility of the Department, and DOC officers helped Forest & Bird branches with their voluntary work. For the past 19 years, there has been a full-time DOC dotterel warden on the Coromandel coast. But



Forest & Bird volunteer Patricia Olson sets up her dotterel fence on Kuaotunu beach, in the Coromandel.

volunteer minders are still the foundations of tūturiwhatu survival.

Bev went on to monitor and band dotterels all around the Coromandel and engage locals to be minders on their beaches. Meanwhile, in the Eastern Bay of Plenty, Forest & Bird volunteers were minding dotterels on the Ohope Spit, and Te Puke branch adopted the Maketu Spit. Led by legendary conservationists such as Helen and Adrian Harrison and Carole Long, they put up fences, printed signs and leaflets, and visited schools to teach the children.

Panepane Point on Matakana Forest is home to the largest nesting population of New Zealand dotterels in the Bay of Plenty. With the island's iwi, Forest & Bird started a dotterel protection project there. Led by Dave Wills, DOC fostered the project, with islanders Bubby and Jason Murray minding the birds and teaching the local families about the tūturiwhatu pukunui (little bird with big belly) nesting on their beaches. Now the project has been taken over by the iwi, and this happy outcome continues.

Education has been the key to saving this dwindling species. When people start to see and learn about the birds, they understand their plight. Colourful informative DOC signs have replaced the blotchy leaflets and hand-made placards our members created many years ago. Antagonism to the "dotterel fences" has now become understanding and tolerance. Locals have become proud of "their" dotterels and eager to tell visitors about them. Education has also led to responsible dog ownership.

All of these conservation measures, plus pest control, saw numbers of the northern sub-species of NZ dotterel increase from about 1200 birds in 1990 to 1700 in 2004. With continuing protection, that number has remained constant. But the population could and should continue to increase. What the birds need are more dog-free, dotterel-friendly beaches, and it is happening. Dotterels are increasing their range, reclaiming beaches where once they used to live. This summer two chicks hatched at Waikanae Estuary, north of Wellington! This is a tribute to community conservation, as are the dotterels now breeding at Mahia in the Hawke's Bay.

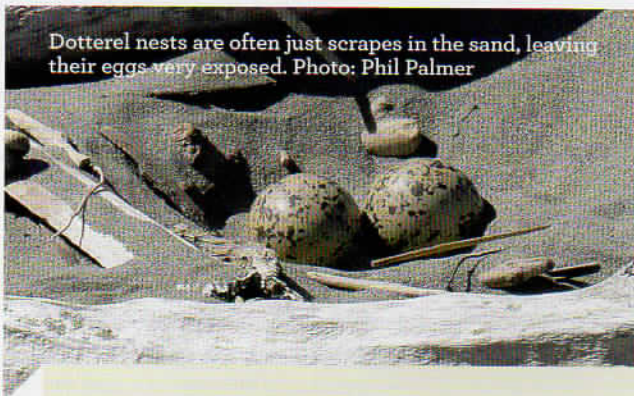
Further south in the Hawke's Bay, when a few dotterels were seen at Aramoana Beach, visionary DOC ranger Rod Hansen put up signs and a kilometre-long string fence. With protection provided, the birds came. Ten years later,



Human activities such as riding and driving can trample on vulnerable dotterel nests and eggs. Photo: Uretiti Beach, Shellie Evans

they are now spilling out of the fenced area and starting to breed further south.

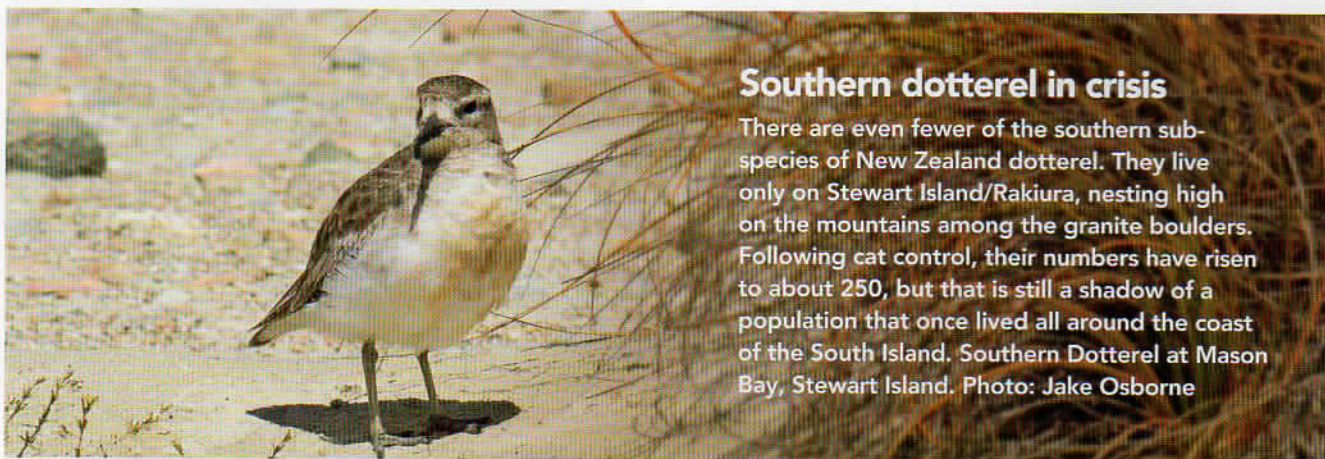
Other species also benefit from dotterel community care. Variable oystercatchers and sometimes white-fronted and Caspian terns nest safely within a dotterel fence.



Dotterel nests are often just scrapes in the sand, leaving their eggs very exposed. Photo: Phil Palmer

Climate claims nesting sites

Signs, string fences, and goodwill have halted the decline of northern NZ dotterels, but this will not protect them from the looming threat of climate change. As sea levels rise and storms increase, dotterel nests will be swept away by surging waves. Already savvy volunteers are shifting nests to higher ground when high seas are forecast. But that can only be a temporary measure. "Managed retreat" is the buzzword for threatened seaside communities. We need to provide this for wildlife as well as people. District and regional plans need to include potential inland roosting and nesting sites for displaced beach birds, and we need to lobby on their behalf.



Southern dotterel in crisis

There are even fewer of the southern sub-species of New Zealand dotterel. They live only on Stewart Island/Rakiura, nesting high on the mountains among the granite boulders. Following cat control, their numbers have risen to about 250, but that is still a shadow of a population that once lived all around the coast of the South Island. Southern Dotterel at Mason Bay, Stewart Island. Photo: Jake Osborne