

Flight



ISSUE 185

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**Conference 2022
Amazing godwits
Wairio's new hide**

Insight

Spring has sprung, the grass has riz
I wonder where those birdies is
Is those birdies on the wing
No, I think the birdies are out
making other birdies



A budgie and peacock enjoy a shared lunch at Ross and Sharon's house.

With all the wet weather we have been having around the country and all the wetlands full to overflowing, the waterfowl, be they ducks, geese, swans, dabchicks or pukeko, have scattered themselves around and are busy building nests and making babies.

All that remains then is for the predators to be kept under control and for some decent weather and we should be in for a good breeding season.

Fish & Game tells us every year there are more birds around than last year, but I have to say I am dubious about that and we have a long way to go to get back to same numbers as 20 or 30 years ago.

But we live in hope.

Ross Cottle, President DUNZ



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Cover: A bar-tailed godwit on the wing. See story p8-9. **Photo Aad van Rijn (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)**

Back: Goldie, the white heron, calls into a South Wairarapa farm for a snack, see story, p13. **Photo Paula Gillett**

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Editorial:

Contributions, including photographs and letters to the editor, are welcomed. Please send these to the editor before the next deadline, 20 January 2023, in time for the February / March issue.

The editor reserves the right to edit articles for content, length, grammar, style, and readability.

AGM & Conference 2022

Annual meeting back on track

President Ross Cottle welcomed members to the 47th AGM and Conference of Ducks Unlimited New Zealand in Wellington on July 30, noting that if last year's event had not been cancelled due to Covid, it would have been the 48th.

The meeting was held at the James Cook Hotel Grand Chancellor, where most of the members were staying.

Apologies were received from Myra Smith, Graeme Berry, Neil and Julie Candy, Will and Jan Abel, Jim Campbell, and Dan Steele.

President's report

Ross said that, since the last meeting, there had been many regulatory changes in the wetland construction area, and in his view, they were "not for the better".

"The regional councils supposedly want people to put in wetlands to suck up nutrients and clean the water but when someone applies for a consent, all sorts of obstacles are put in their way."

This costs a lot of time and money, resulting in people giving up and walking away, he said.

He reported that DUNZ membership was declining, with a scarcity of young members, and Covid taking a toll as well.

"With that in mind, the Board has been putting considerable effort and funding into student scholarships – mainly wetland related."

He said the organisation was in good heart financially thanks to DU's Waterfowl and Wetland Trust, which could provide funding for the many good projects that came along.

DU's flagship project, the Wairio Wetland, was nearing completion after 17 years, with another year or so to go. Ross thanked DU's major sponsors, the Pharazyn Trust, Muter Trust, Gift Trust and South Wairarapa Rotary.

He noted the passing of two past presidents, Graham Gurr (see p14) and Neil Hayes, and a good friend and member of DU, Chris Thomas, in the past year (June/July *Flight*).

He closed by thanking the Board for their help over the past two years, especially Jim Law and conference organiser Adrienne Bushell.

Financial report

Treasurer John Bishop presented the accounts for the past two years. He said



Jim Law, Anne Michel, John Bishop, Karin Campbell, Ian Lyver and Craig Worth. Below: Ross and Alice Hood at Zealandia.



the Board had already approved the 2021 accounts, but they needed to be approved at the AGM, along with the 2022 accounts.

He said DU's main source of funds was membership fees, corporate donations, conference dinner auctions (which was cancelled last year) and gun club fundraisers, of which there was one in the past two years.

Membership had declined dramatically, through attrition and Covid, in all member categories. Volunteer hours were unchanged from the previous year, with most of the time spent on the Wairio project.

Flight magazine was now being published three times a year and back

issues were available to read on the DU website, where visitor numbers remained stable.

The Board had decided the expense of posting *Flight* to life members in Canada had become too costly and overseas members would be sent an electronic copy in future.

John pointed out the major difference on the balance sheet between 2021 and 2022 had been the lack of activity during Covid in 2021 and, in the past year, the receipt of about \$50,000 from the Waterfowl and Wetland Trust for future projects and scholarships.

Continued next page

Celebration for DU scholar



Jim Law, second from left, and Marilyn Law represented (DUNZ) Wetland Care at a function for scholarship recipients at Victoria University in July.

Cameron Johnson, centre, received a Wetland Care scholarship this year. He has completed his master's degree and is now working with a company that

quantifies carbon in forests so clients can register the carbon credits under the Environmental Trading Scheme.

At the function, Jim reconnected with Rhys Barlow, left, an old friend from his own university days (many years ago) at Victoria.

NEWS FLASH

Blue Duck Station in the Ruapehu District is to be the venue for the next AGM and conference. To fit in with the farm's many activities, the date is May 12-13, so keep an eye out for registration details early next year. The farm has a range of accommodation – from lodges to small cabins with bunks. DU Director, and Blue Duck Station's owner, Dan Steele says everything will be on site, with meals, jet boat history tours, wetland visits, activities and trap demonstrations, and the usual charity auction on offer.

AGM 2023



Olwyn Griffin and DU Patron Di Pritt catch up after two years, while Steve Clarkson, Lyn Watson and Kees Weytmans wait for the AGM to begin. Below: John Dermer and Brian Simmons.

From previous page

Waterfowl and Wetland Trust

David Smith reported that the trust's funds had not been immune from global events – namely Covid and the war in Ukraine – and had lost 11-12% of its value at the time of the AGM, in line with global investment markets.

David said the trust balance was now \$401,000, though \$50,000 had been moved to a separate account to fund DU activities in the current financial year.

He said if the trust continued to paid out a similar amount to DU each year, its funds would be exhausted in seven or eight years.

“From a trustee’s point of view, that’s meeting the objectives of what it was set up for but we as an organisation need to think about whether that’s what we want to happen or whether we start seeking other sources of funds.”

The trustees will discuss that but DU, as the recipient of the trust, also needs to consider this.

The trust is very supportive of the scholarships and would like them to continue.

John Bishop said DU appreciated the efforts the trust was making and the \$50,000 is earmarked for DU and will be used within the next five months.

Scholarships

Jim Law said the DUNZ Wetland Care scholarships, which were set up after the 2019 AGM, had turned out to be a most productive use of Waterfowl and Wetland Trust funds.

So far, five of the \$5000 scholarships had



been awarded, four in the past financial year.

Initially, it had been difficult to liaise with the universities but now the processes were in place, with the latest scholarships going to students from Victoria, Canterbury and Otago universities.

The Board had decided to change the format to two funding rounds each year, one closing on September 1 and the other on February 1, and this timing would suit master’s students.

Jim said one of the previous recipients had expressed extreme gratitude for the grant, which had helped them complete their qualifications.

Election of officers

Gill Lundie and Emma Williams had

resigned as DUNZ directors due to ill-health and work commitments. John Cheyne was confirmed as a director after being co-opted earlier this year, and three directors who had completed their two-year terms – Jim Law, Adrienne Longuet-Bushell and John Dermer – were re-elected.

Wetland Care

In a written report, Neil Candy and Will Abel said the past year had been unusual. DU had received three enquiries from non-members seeking advice on developing wetlands and DU had managed to help two of these with site visits, but the third was too far away to visit.

DU had provided \$6050 for the construction of two wetlands for

members, in Manawatu and the Wairarapa. Both were now complete.

There had been a few enquiries for grants this year, and more are welcomed. Funds had recently been provided for a substantial wetland. Details of this will be included in next year’s report.

Royal swan

Ross Cottle reported that the situation of the past couple of years remained the same, with no swans available from Peacock Springs or DU breeders.

Wairio Wetland

Jim Law said it had been a busy two years at Wairio, as reported in previous issues of *Flight*.

DU’s strategy document for Wairio, which expired about 18 months ago, had been updated, setting out what DU would like to achieve from 2021 to 2030, and it has also negotiated the extension of its Wairio management agreement with the Department of Conservation for another year.

A lot of work has been achieved at Wairio, with \$44,000 spent in the past two years.

That involved planting 1700 trees last year at the north-eastern end of the project where DU aims to create a kahikatea forest.

Jim said that in future years, people approaching the wetland on the stopbank would pass a wonderful kahikatea forest and, after about 200-300 metres, the vista would open up would reveal the lowest part of the wetland, stretching about 130 hectares to the south.

This year, 2000 trees are being planted (see story p9).

DU had been given a significant funding boost for this by Project Crimson via the Aorangi Restoration Trust, which aims to create a biodiversity corridor from the Aorangi Forest Park to the Remutaka Ranges. Jim is a trustee of the restoration trust.

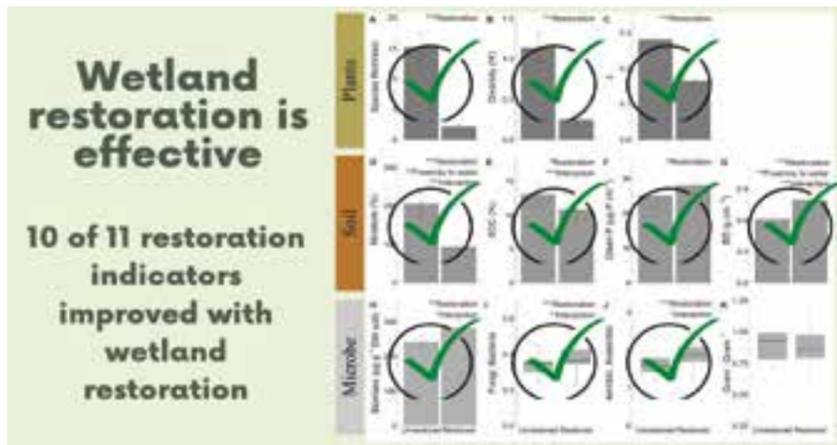
Climate Change Minister James Shaw recently attended a Project Crimson and Trees that Count planting event at Jim and Marilyn’s Palliser Ridge farm, and afterwards at a ceremony in one of the woolsheds, he noticed the Ducks Unlimited NZ logo on the vehicles. He said: “Are you the guys who have made that wonderful wetland on the eastern shores of Lake Wairarapa?”

He was excited about the progress being made there, Jim said. “So take a bow.”



From top: Kay and Kees Weytmans; John and Gail Cheyne; Gay Munro and Chase Voss.

Beyond the boggy paddock



The 11 indicators Shannon used in her research.

Guest speaker Shannon Bentley, above, the recipient of DUNZ's first Wetland Care scholarship, says her study into wetland restoration on private land, including some DU members' wetlands, shows that restoring wetlands on private land can make a big difference.

She spoke to the AGM about studying soil, microbial and plant samples to assess the health of wetlands at various stages of restoration.

She has now finished her master's and is working for the Ministry of Primary Industries as a policy analyst. Over summer she worked as a BLAKE NIWA Freshwater Ambassador.

For her thesis, she did a pilot run of her field work at the university block on Stage 4 of Wairio Wetland.

Shannon says wetlands are biodiversity hotspots, and beyond attracting birdlife, are really valuable for their ecosystem services – reducing peak flood heights; regulating the climate by retaining large quantities of soil carbon; and capturing nutrients, which helps purify water.

It is commonly known that New Zealand has lost 90% of its wetlands, but in the Wairarapa, 98% has been lost.

Although there had been many studies of public wetlands, there hadn't been a lot of research on the effects of wetland restoration on private land, she said.

Restoration on public wetlands is usually well funded and carried out by experts, whereas on private land, it tends to be funded and limited by personal finances, and are subject to personal preferences.

She looked at changes in soil, microbial and plant indicators of wetland health in Wairarapa wetlands, both restored and unrestored (boggy paddocks) to see how they changed during restoration.

She said 75% of wetlands in the Wairarapa were on private property, and with Wairio as well, it made it an ideal study site.

"We talked to the farmers and said, 'We're here to sample your wetland but we would also like to sample an area of land that's still being used and looked like what your wetland did before it was restored'.

"Then we set up vegetation plots and took soil cores to figure out what their properties were."

"Once we had taken all the measurements and done some fun statistics, we saw some promising results.

"All but one of our indicators had improved, showing that restoration projects were having a positive effect." [See graphic above.]

The wetlands varied greatly – from a small gully that had just been fenced off and planted to huge projects that had involved big earthworks and had been planted up.

They also varied in the length of time they had been restored, size and what that restoration meant to that farmer or person.

She said it was difficult to find consistent patterns but it appeared that the hydrology in a wetland could indicate how quickly it was recovering, and

those that had water running through them seemed to recover faster than depressional wetlands.

The main key conclusions were that, despite all the variations, wetland restoration on private land is effective and has applications for ecosystem services.

The study found an increase in soil carbon, indicating that the wetlands were doing good things for sequestering and holding carbon in their soils, and there were other indicators that the wetlands were increasing their ability to abate floods and filter out excess nutrients.

Shannon concluded by thanking DU for the scholarship, and everyone who had helped with her studies.

A report of Shannon's studies can be found at: www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048969722028571?via%3Dihub.

Underbirds step up

This year's Bird of the Year competition is giving the "underbirds" a go including several wetland dwellers.

Online voting opens on Monday, October 17, and closes on Sunday, October 30, with the winner announced the next morning.

Last year's interloper, the pekapeka or long-tailed bat is not eligible this year and the kākāpō is also out of the running.

Forest & Bird's list of underbirds include the spotless crane, grey duck, scaup, dabchick and fernbird.



The female takahē welcomes DU to her territory; tour guide Roy Sharp points out some shags roosting in a tree; and signage explains why the sanctuary fence needs to be 2.2m high.



Zealandia on a rainy day

The destination for this year's conference field trip was just a quick 10-minute bus ride away from the hotel to Wellington's urban 225-hectare eco-sanctuary, Zealandia.

After DU members had a look around the display centre and Zealandia staff introduced themselves, the visitors split into groups to venture out into the cold, wet Wellington morning for an abbreviated tour.

The volunteer tour guides pointed out landmarks and birdlife along the track, and provided a potted history of Zealandia.

In 1990, Forest & Bird member

Jim Lynch had come up with a proposal to "bring the birds back to Wellington", and once the Karori reservoir was decommissioned in 1992, he recognised it as an ideal location for a sanctuary to protect and nurture New Zealand birdlife.

In July 1995, the Karori Sanctuary Trust was officially launched and, in 1999, construction of the \$2.5-million predator-proof fence began. It was completed later that year, creating the world's first fully fenced urban eco-sanctuary.

The unrelenting rain made bird spotting difficult – even the normally boisterous kākā were

somewhat subdued – but our tour guides soon pointed out large numbers of pied shags roosting in trees at the edge of lake, and then a kererū perched high up in a tree.

A little further on into the takahē's territory, and the sanctuary's resident pair there seemed unperturbed by the rain and the arrival of a bedraggled bunch of visitors.

Other bird sightings along the tracks included a North Island robin and a tieke/saddleback.

Lunch was served on returning to the visitor centre before the bus returned for the trip back to the hotel.



Chris Bindon, Adrienne Bushell and John Dermer spot a kākā coming into the feed station, as another takes shelter.





Above and below: Godwits at Yalu Jiang. Right: John gets a close-up view of the godwits with the help of Bruce Postill, of the Pūkoro Mirando Shorebird Centre. Photos Nigel Milius

'Godwits don't need visas

An entertaining dinner speaker, NZ's former ambassador to China, John McKinnon, was a welcome addition to this year's programme.

During his career as a diplomat, he had three postings to the New Zealand Embassy in Beijing, "one in the 1970s and two this century". Two were as ambassador.

He says when you're a diplomat, and you represent your country, you do a lot of very boring things wherever you are, but there are also memorable moments.

One was soon after he had arrived for his first posting as ambassador. It was January 2015 and the Chinese premiere of the first part of *The Hobbit*. The event, attended by director Peter Jackson, was a big deal with a red carpet and all the trimmings, and the embassy hosted a reception for him.

John thought nothing could beat that occasion, but in May 2017, John was invited to go to an area between China and the Korean peninsula to see the migratory birds.

He recalled leaving Beijing incredibly early in the morning. When they arrived at the viewing location, it was incredibly windy and "you were at risk of being blown over".

In terms of looking at birds, he said it wasn't great, but it was fun and followed by the obligatory Chinese banquet.

"There were a lot of red knots there but they were quite distant from where we were standing and we couldn't really see them."

The following year, John was invited to go to the Yalu River to see the

godwits, and that April, he flew with ornithologist Adrian Riegen to a city called Dandong on the border with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

"The godwits and various other birds all congregate in the wetlands on the Yalu River there, and I said, semi-jokingly, that the godwits were either very dumb or very intelligent. They were very intelligent because they never needed visas and they were very dumb because they landed in what is one of the most sensitive international borders in the world," John said.

Again, it was an early morning start, but this time, the weather was kinder and there were thousands of godwits and they were quite close.

"It was a great experience and it is quite extraordinary when you think about these birds, they rest there before they

head on to Siberia or Alaska to breed. But they've come all the way from New Zealand basically.

"It's extraordinary to see these godwits knowing that the last time they were on land was in New Zealand. It was great to see them and it was a wonderful, wonderful experience. And after that, of course, we had a banquet."

John was accompanied by a team of New Zealanders from the Pūkoro Mirando Shorebird Centre, who were doing shorebird surveys in the region.

Nigel Milius, part of that team, said in the *Pūkoro Mirando News*: "The spectacle of over 40,000 shorebirds wheeling around in close formation must surely be one of the natural world's greatest sights and one that always stirs the emotions no matter how many times one has seen it."



The biggest count they recorded while they were there was 31,500 bar-tailed godwits, 9500 dunlins, 7500 great knots, plus much smaller numbers of other species.

As an aside, John said their visit coincided with the first time that Kim Jong Un, the new leader of the DPRK, went to China to visit Xi Jinping and John thinks they saw the train he was on, as there weren't many trains travelling from the DPRK to Beijing at that time.

John said there was a serious purpose to his visit to see the godwits: China is on an economic development binge to improve the country's standard of living and create more economic opportunities but this development encroaches on wetlands so part of my reason, as NZ ambassador, was to say to the Chinese that New Zealanders think wetlands are important.

"We know you've got all these development issues, but please, please safeguard these wetlands because without them the birds won't come."

The Department of Conservation now has a dialogue with the China's State



John McKinnon with conference organiser DU Director Adrienne Bushell.

Forestry administration, which despite its name, is the Chinese government agency that looks after wetlands and the protection of species. And Education New Zealand has given some money, not a huge amount to promote research into migratory birds in China, he said.

"So there is a continuing level of interest in what's happening with these migratory birds."

"We hope these activities will have some

influence on municipal and provincial governments. Because they're the ones who basically authorise, say, a factory to be built.

"It was fascinating to visit but it was also meaningful in terms of New Zealand-China relations, and these birds are like a bridge between our two countries.

"But of course, they don't really belong to either of our two countries. They belong to the world."

Wairio hide perfectly sited

On July 9 a short ceremony was held to mark the official opening of the viewing hide at Stage 4, Wairio.

There had been a tape to cut, but earlier in the day, it has been called into service to mark the locations of the kahikatea that had just been planted so a short speech by DU President Ross Cottle had to suffice.

Ross thanked Wairarapa residents Patrick and Janet Velvin, who were at the opening, for their generous donation which helped fund the hide.

He said the hide had been several years in the planning and a further year in the execution, largely due to having to leap many bureaucratic hurdles. Now it is in place, he expects it to be well used over the coming summer.

DU Director John Cheyne commented that the new hide, unlike others such as the one at Boggy Pond nearby, was perfectly situated for birdwatchers.

It faced southeast with the sun behind it most of the day, and because it overlooked a shallow wetland, there was a greater diversity of birds to see.



Taking in the view from the hide, are, from left: Jim Law, Ian Jensen, Stephen Hartley, Patrick Velvin, Adrienne Bushell, Ross Cottle and Janet Velvin.



Flooding at Wairio a week after the planting day on July 7.
Flood photos GWRC

Kahikatea forest of the future

DU Director Jim Law's vision of a wonderful kahikatea forest on the northeastern side of Wairio Wetland is becoming closer to reality after a public planting day on July 7.

Despite an early challenge when, a week later, the skies opened and torrential rain inundated the newly planted area, the trees have survived.

Fortunately, the efforts of the 30 or so

volunteers, pictured above, who had planted the 500 kahikatea, kānuka and flax had not been in vain as the floodwaters subsided quickly.

There were 2000 plants earmarked for



Serena, Anthony and Blake, of Better Nature, planting the last of the trees on recently constructed islands at the eastern edge of the kahikatea forest-to-be in Stage 4 at Wairio.
Photo Jim Law



Ross Cottle and Holly on duty at the refreshment station.

survives its first challenge

the site so after the volunteers finished their quota, contractors Better Nature planted the remainder.

Helping Jim and President Ross Cottle at the planting day were DUNZ members,

Kahutara Primary students and staff, South Wairarapa Rotary Club, Greater Wellington Regional Council staff and Better Nature.

After their hard work, the volunteers

were treated to a sausage sizzle and a drink, courtesy of Ross Cottle and ably assisted by DU Director Adrienne Bushell, before everyone headed off by foot, ATV and car to the ceremony for the viewing hide (see page 9).

Goldie, the white heron – what a life!

JOHN CHEYNE

Paula Gillett and Stephen McCaughran and their son Ben live on a farm on the northeast edge of Lake Wairarapa near Featherston. They have a strong family interest in birds and are longstanding members of Ducks Unlimited.

There are a number of significant wetlands on their property which support a diverse range of birds, including the critically threatened bittern or matuku.

Paula still does a lot of farm work on her horse so therefore moves around the property quietly and observes much more of what is going on in the bird world than she would using a noisy quad bike.

Over the years the family has observed the occasional kōtuku/white heron but in early spring 2019, one followed Paula home from the lake and set up camp at the family's two-storey home two kilometres away, returning to the lake in the evening.

Initially it ate all the goldfish in their pond by the house so was appropriately named Goldie. Later it was even observed preying a small bird in a tree by the house.



Goldie drops in for breakfast before heading off to the lake. Photo Paula Gillett

They tried feeding Goldie some small pieces of meat which he/she accepted and slowly became quite tame.

Kōtuku only nest near Ōkārito Lagoon on the West Coast of the South Island. Goldie would disappear in spring but has returned to the farm each of the past four winters.

The family can get very close to Goldie and they now feed it regularly with small pieces of meat placed on the handrail on the outside of the second storey of their house. Sometimes the bird has briefly

roosted on the tractor and quad bike.

Most days they observe Goldie flying off to the lake for a change in diet but returning to the house most mornings for breakfast.

Similar white heron behaviour has been recorded on the West Coast of the South Island during the whitebait season where at least one bird is reportedly hand-fed whitebait on the front step of a hut and occasionally venturing inside.

Some birds know when they are onto a good thing, don't they!

Pallets put to good use at peat lake

Wooden shipping pallets are being turned into predator traps for use at a Waikato peat lake.

People on community work sentences are making the trap boxes for Lake Ruatuna in a collaboration between the Departments of Conservation and Corrections and Fonterra.

DOC's Wayne Green said they identified a collaboration that made use of a readily available resource and helped upskill offenders.

Hundreds of trap boxes were available

free to community groups throughout the region, he said.

"Lake Ruatuna is a Fonterra-DOC Living Water project site, and it's previously benefited from the partnership through a significant investment in revegetation, removal of pest plants and protection of the lake using a koi carp control trap."

All Fonterra's pallets are made from green or heat-treated sustainable NZ pine. The co-operative writes off 10,000 pallets every year.



Fonterra's Lawrence Hooker and DOC biodiversity ranger Rose Graham at Lake Ruatuna with one of the pest boxes. Photo DOC

When wetlands catch fire



A firefighter douses hotspots at the Kaimaumu wetlands.

Photo: Fire and Emergency NZ

During the past summer and autumn, two devastating and costly wetland fires challenged firefighters who spent weeks trying to contain the widespread fires at both ends of the country.

In the Far North, a fire that started in Waiharara, north of Kaitiāia, on December 18 destroyed large areas of Kaimaumu wetlands, and took nearly two months to contain.

In Southland, a fire swept through the Awarua-Waituna wetland and burnt about 1370 hectares. The fire started on April 2 and although the acute emergency response was scaled down after six days, duck shooters were warned to avoid the area over Anzac weekend due to fears of lingering fires burning in underground peat beds.

Although wetland fires are uncommon, both regions had had fires previously – at Kaimaumu, the vegetation was almost completely destroyed during a fierce fire in November 1988, and fires in October 1986 and October 2005 devastated the Awarua-Waituna wetlands.

Fires ripping through wetlands seems contradictory, but they are not as uncommon as thought.

Fire and Emergency NZ wildfire specialist Graeme Still told *Flight* magazine: “Peat fires start when a fire ignites above the ground, which burns through the surface fuels (grasses, shrubs, trees) and into the root systems.

“It also burns through the surface duff layer (leaves, twigs), eventually making its way into the peat surface below the ground.

“While fire typically travels fast, peat fire travels very slowly underground, but can take months to put out.

“That’s why peat fires are often referred to as the ‘sleeping giant’, as they can slowly resurface and ignite unburnt fuels.

“Peat forms when plant material does not fully rot down in acidic conditions, and if peat is deep-seated and ignites, it can be harder to put out.

“Saturating the ground with water doesn’t always absorb into the soil below, rather, it can create a crusty surface layer.

“This all depends on the depth of the peat, that’s why there are specialised tools firefighters use at these fires.

“They use peat probes and machines that dig their way underground, creating holes to help the water get deeper and saturate the smouldering peat soil,” he said.

“Crews also dig trenches to just below the peat soil, which acts as a fuel break. To pick up any hot spots underground, they also use infrared cameras which sense heat.

“Operationally, putting out peat fires requires a specialised skillset, that’s why there will always be Fire and Emergency peat fire specialists working at these types of incidents. It is also hot, heavy, and physically demanding work,” he said.

At Awarua-Waituna, the boggy uneven ground was challenging for firefighters as it made it difficult to get around, and the hot ash pits that burnt underground were hard to get to. Some areas were tidal, with the water levels changing through the day.

About 40 firefighters and nine helicopters fought the fire at its peak.

In Kaimaumu, the shifting wind conditions, along with the combination of wetlands, peat and sand created an unpredictable environment.

At the peak of the fire, there were about 70 firefighters working on the fire and five helicopters. They fought the fire for 52 days and it burnt through 2828 hectares.

The investigations into the cause of both the fires were ongoing, Graeme Still said.

Flora and fauna losses are expected to be significant in both regions.

Otago University Emeritus Professor Sir Alan Mark, a leading environmentalist, said Awarua-Waituna was one of the few remaining large wetlands helping to protect New Zealand against climate change by storing carbon.

“Wetland ecosystems offer unparalleled carbon storage, and the depth of peat in Awarua-Waituna is particularly substantial.

“It is an extremely valuable ecosystem and has unique biodiversity. It is the only place in the country with an intriguing collection of alpine wetland plants near sea-level.”

Sir Alan said that with the western edge of the wetland running along the highway, it was a prime area for fires to break out, especially with recent dry weather conditions.

“Fire is the worst thing that can happen to any wetland, they are hard to put out and the combustion converts the stored carbon to carbon dioxide, a major greenhouse gas.”

OK Boomer survey’s first year

John Sumich, Matuku Reserve Trust, reports on his survey recording places where booming bitterns have been heard.

It’s been a year since the OK Boomer survey was started and the responses came in.

The rationale for the survey was that for a very mobile yet cryptic species the assessment of bittern numbers is difficult and an indirect count may give a clearer idea of its true population stability.

Surveying for male bitterns in spring/early summer when their booming indicates attempts to attract mates and to deter rivals is one such measure.

This is the one time of the year when the birds are relatively fixed to a locality that can provide the required conditions of food supply to bring up another generation.

Many regional councils as part of their obligations of care for their local biodiversity, survey for bittern using audio recorders or assessment in the field listening out for the males’ booms.

The Department of Conservation also has an increasing interest in assessing the population stability of bittern.

It uses audio recorders longer term in many of its large wetlands and has plans to add other important sites.

These wetlands are of vital importance to bitterns because it is in the larger sites that genetic diversity can be maintained yet many of these large wetlands have issues of water abstraction, for example, to reduce flooding such as at Whangamarino and Te Waihora/Lake Ellesmere.

Reducing water levels might leave an otherwise good habitat high and dry interfering with nest building or maintenance.

Habitat loss, drainage, and a decreasing quality of water due to toxins or farm effluent are a concern of wetlands, large and small.

The survey had responses from individuals from a range of the smaller wetlands that councils or DOC do not survey, and from last year’s boom time, reports came in from Ōkārīto to Kerikeri. [See map].

OK Boomer also had input from sites with audio recorders deployed by



community groups and similarly from sites where DOC is monitoring.

Some sites recorded better numbers than usual, eg Ōkārīto, yet others had fewer, with DOC audio recorders at Te Waihora and other Canterbury sites not detecting any booms though plain listening did detect some.

The concept has been picked up across the ditch with the Australians also starting this season to record male booming sites to help monitor population stability.

Thanks to all who contributed last season and with booming already under way at my local te Henga wetland, please send in reports of booming to www.matukulink.org.nz/OK_boomer.

Rare visitor spotted

In August a bittern was spotted at Te Onepoto estuary in Whitireia Park, Porirua, the first recorded sighting in that area since the 1980s.

Whitireia Park co-ordinator Robin Smith was walking her dog in the park at dusk when she saw it fly away, possibly disturbed by another dog in the water.

“The sighting is a reminder that dogs should be kept under control in the area to protect native birds that forage in the estuary,” Robin said.

The Whitireia Restoration Group undertakes pest control in the park.

Hunter with a generous heart

It was with sadness we learnt Ducks Unlimited NZ past president Graham Gurr's valiant battle with cancer had come to an end. While the outcome had been inevitable for some time, Graham's courage and fight were a testimony to his strength and determination.

Graham was a member of DU since the early 1980s. He served on the Board, taking on the task of Treasurer and later President, then Chairman. It was through DU that he and I met.

Graham was born in England. His mother died before he started school. While he was cared for by his father and grandparents, he was sent to boarding school at an early age. He did not enjoy it, especially the food.

He refused to eat peas for the rest of his life; sweetcorn and swedes were, he said, cattle food. Notwithstanding his restrictive views as to what constituted food, Graham became a very good cook.

Graham survived boarding school by reading every hunting and fishing book he could lay his hands on. He became enamoured with New Zealand for its fishing and hunting. It was clear he had suffered from OCHD (obsessive compulsive hunting disorder, including the fishing variant) from an early stage in his life.

One of his first jobs was working for a publisher in Belgium. He enjoyed Brussels and learning French. It fitted well with his love of books. When he came to New Zealand, he worked for Kerridge Odeon but left after giving his frank opinion about the company's prospects – which later came to fruition.

He then set up Halcyon Press specialising in hunting and fishing stories. In doing so, he played a significant role in saving hunting and fishing book publishing in New Zealand at a time it was facing obscurity. He was important in profiling some of NZ's best outdoor authors, including Daryl Crimp, Graeme Sinclair, Bruce Banwell, Graeme Marshall and many others.

Whitcoulls was Halcyon's biggest customer. When Blue Star bought Whitcoulls, terms of trade were changed, and books were taken on a sell or return basis. As a niche market, Halcyon then struggled until Graham pulled the plug.

He was a reasonably competent fisherman when he left the UK. On his first fishing outing in New Zealand, he caught the largest fish of his life –



Graham Paul Gurr
March 18, 1951 – July 4, 2022

and had to put it back because it was undersize.

Having covered nearly all local fishing and hunting options, Graham increasingly looked overseas. He went to Namibia hunting big game. He met Wally Hock, who was with DU Inc, on a trip to Washington State and travelled to South Dakota to hunt with Wally together with Dave Johnston, and later Craig Worth and me.

Subsequent trips were to British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Alaska, Uruguay, Montana, Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Argentina.

In 1991 Graham and I took a lease of 120 acres in the Opuatia swamp in north Waikato. After two years we exercised our right to buy the property, with its two lakes, some hill country and oodles of potential.

We put in ponds, walkways and built a hut. Graham got a permit to build a boat shed which was inspected by the council at various points in the construction. Graham was concerned it could be seen from the road and we would have to pull it down if we did not have a permit. It never had a boat in it.

Graham did a lot of work on the swamp, planting oaks and other trees. We planted a small pine forest which then required pruning and thinning.

In 2012 I moved to Palmerston North, and about then Graham retired and moved to the Waikato. Our moves south meant retaining the swamp was impracticable. It was a hard decision to sell it.

In 2014 we located a property an hour north of Palmerston North on 11 acres with access to the adjoining 500 acres. We called it Waipuru Lodge. We put



Graham digging a septic tank at Opuatia swamp, north Waikato, and with a salmon caught in Cold Bay, Alaska.

in two large ponds and Graham raised pheasants.

First impressions of Graham for some were not good. He could be rude and abrupt, but for those who got to know him, it was clear he had one of the largest hearts possible. He was kind and turned up with unexpected gifts. He cared for his staff and friends.

He kept in touch with his sister, friends and contacts all over the world. His love for Christine and the boys grew by the year. He was very proud of Alex and Anthony and welcomed Alex, Anthony's wife, as a daughter. He was a friend and fellow conservationist of many DU members.

No tribute to Graham's life would be complete without comment on his dogs, of which he was enamoured. He had seen a pair of Large Munsterlanders working on one of his trips and was determined to have a pair just like them.

He never gave calm instructions to his dogs, but they understood 'Graham speak'. If he was shouting, they knew he loved them. They will miss him as much as we do.

Graham's passing leaves a huge hole in many of our lives, none more so than for Christine, Alex, Anthony and Alex.

–David Smith



Wetland Care Scholarship

Interested in studying wetland birds or wetland restoration?
A Wetland Care Scholarship could be for you!

BACKGROUND/PURPOSE

Wetland Care Research Scholarships are Ducks Unlimited-sponsored scholarships applicable to any student currently enrolled or affiliated with a New Zealand university.

Funds are aimed at encouraging and supporting students who wish to push the boundaries of what is known about wetland restoration and conservation.

Up to \$20,000 is available annually to cover up to four separate scholarships of \$5000 each.

Funds can be used to support student living costs or cover the costs of equipment purchase, logistics and consumables.

CRITERIA

Applications will be accepted from students/researchers affiliated with universities interested in making a difference through wetland conservation.

Funding is aimed at student projects designed to facilitate better management of New Zealand wetlands or their environment. The student project must

be based in New Zealand or be of direct benefit to New Zealand based on current wetland conservation issues.

Preference will be given to applications that demonstrate some of the following criteria:



- projects of direct benefit to New Zealand based on current wetland conservation issues
- innovative thinking that pushes the boundaries of what is known about New Zealand wetland conservation
- research on native threatened wetland bird species
- research with clear objectives and

measurable outcomes

- research with a strong wetland management and conservation applications.

VALUE

Wetland Care will award up to four scholarships of \$5000 each in two funding rounds a year, with applications closing on March 31 and September 30.

Funds will be paid in one lump sum to successful candidates upon commencement or completion of milestones agreed at the time the scholarship is awarded.

INTERESTED?

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Please email scholarships@wetlandcare.org.nz with your questions.

Terms and conditions, plus an online application form, are on the Ducks Unlimited NZ website, www.ducks.org.nz.

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We deliver and advocate for effective wetland restoration, development, research and education; and support the preservation of threatened waterfowl and the ethical and sustainable use of wetlands.