

Article for magazine and website – Black-billed Gull Project

This season, for the first time, full time work was carried out on black-billed gulls in the Marlborough and Nelson regions. The primary objectives were to resight as many previously banded birds as possible, to monitor reproductive success, to take photos of the colonies from a helicopter to compare to ground counts, and to discover information about movements of birds during and after the breeding season. Raising awareness about the plight of the gulls through articles and presentations and by encouraging direct involvement in the project was also a priority.

Since 2011/12, a total of 1596 black-billed gull chicks have been banded with an easily readable darvic colour band. This allows resights of individual birds from a distance, and has provided an excellent starting point from which to study known age birds. Of these banded birds, a total of 41% have been seen at least once since banding. Total resights from 2011/12 is 34%, 40% of the 2012/13 cohort, and 42% of birds from 2013/14. These sightings are raising some interesting questions about both adult and juvenile survival which I am in the process of examining further.

A total of five colonies were monitored for productivity – one in the Nelson region, and four in Marlborough. The one in the Nelson region failed due to flooding and most likely predation. Two in Marlborough also failed completely; one due to predation, and for the other the cause was unknown. The two colonies on the Wairau River did very well, emphasizing the importance of that river to the gulls.

Aerial photographs were taken for four out of the five colonies. One colony was not done because most of the birds were red-bills gulls and it is too difficult to distinguish between the two species on a photograph. Ground counts were done at all colonies to compare to the aerial photograph counts, and the differences between the two counts varied from -22% to 12%. Variability could be due to a number of factors, such as time of day the photograph is taken, weather and light conditions, etc. I will be carrying out further research to fine tune this methodology of determining an accurate and representative correction factor.

Resighting of banded birds resulted in some fascinating information. The farthest ever recorded distance travelled for a black-billed gull was when a two-year old bird banded at the Clarence River was seen spending last winter at Miranda, Auckland, and was then seen again back at the Clarence the following spring. One of the most significant and ground-breaking findings was that birds did not necessarily breed on the same river on which they were born. A survey for colonies and banded birds was also done in the West Coast region during both the summer and winter – this resulted in some interesting findings about site fidelity and important wintering grounds. Movement between river catchments is hugely fascinating in that it ensures genetic diversity within populations and raises many questions regarding site and partner fidelity.

I use every opportunity I can get to educate the public and raise awareness. I presented at the Birds NZ AGM Conference and at the Save the Wairau River Inc AGM. I was invited to give a talk at the Lions Club in Seddon, and I attended a couple of braided river workshops. Enquiries about sightings of banded gulls are a great educational opportunity on a national and international level. Bumper stickers on the cars of several BNZ members has also helped spread the word.

This project was in partnership with Save the Wairau River Inc, with funding from the Department of Conservation, Pub Charity, Lotteries Grant Board, Wildlife Management International Ltd, and the Birds NZ Research Fund. A big thank you goes out to all the volunteers who have been so dedicated at helping me with all aspects of this project. Without them, none of this would be possible!

For more information about the project, or how you can get involved, contact me at claudia “at” wnil.co.nz



Nelson and Marlborough BNZ members helping out with chick banding



Young BNZ member Hinewai Bell (Marlborough) is a regular helper at chick banding



Educating the public at every opportunity



Bumper sticker