

Yellow-eyed Penguin Early Chick Mortality

Every year approximately a third of all hoiho that hatch on the mainland die in the first two weeks of life. Given the small and decreasing size of the mainland hoiho population, these early chick deaths have a significant negative impact on the conservation of this species. Funding from the BoNZ Project Assistance fund allowed necropsies of all deceased chicks this season, the fourth season in a row that this work has been carried out.

Unfortunately this season was a particularly bad one for chick mortality, with more than 60 chicks dying – more than twice the previous season. As a result, the necropsies were an incredibly valuable part of understanding this increase in mortalities, and as a direct result of this work we are confident we can address one of the main causes of death, ensuring it is resolved before the upcoming season.

This work was also useful to gather more information on Respiratory Distress Syndrome (RDS), the leading cause of death in Yellow-eyed penguin chicks. This data will feed into a larger PhD research project looking into this disease, as well as investigating a novel gyrovirus, Yellow-eyed penguin Gyrovirus, that was found to be associated with RDS in 2023. It is vital that we continue to increase our understanding of these chick deaths, with the aim of increasing survivability of chicks and ensuring the next generation of yellow-eyed penguins is there to bolster the struggling population. I am grateful to BoNZ for providing funding towards these post-mortems and sample collection via the Project Assistance Fund, allowing this important work to continue.

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