No. 36, January 2026 www.motukaikoura.org

Kākā Comments

Newsletter of the Motu Kaikoura Trust Board

Update from the Chair

I am pleased to report 2025 has been a year of solid achievement for the Motu Kaikoura Trust. If 2024 was notable for the major upgrading of our infrastructure and accommodation facilities, over the past year we have made significant progress towards our long-term goal of eradicating rats from the island as set out in our plan *Motu Kaikōura - Zero Rats in 1000 Days.* For further information please see our website for the latest 2025 annual rat management report.

Two species of rodents were on Motu Kaikōura when we began our manual rat control operation in 2014: ship rat at very high levels, and Pacific rat or kiore barely detectable. As the result of the steady attrition achieved by our 100 m x 100 m bait/trap station grid, by 2020 ship rats had been effectively eliminated from the island. However, as a result, kiore numbers rapidly increased to fill the void. While our existing network blocked that, it became clear that due to the smaller foraging range of kiore the network was not up to reducing kiore the way it had ship rats. In fact we had reached stalemate. So late in 2024 the Trust came up with a plan to break the stalemate. Essentially to intensify the existing network to achieve a 100 m x 50 m grid and then progressively 50 m x 50 m. To our knowledge, manual eradication of kiore has never been attempted on an island of this size and topography but over the past year we have made a start. The network has been intensified and expanded with the addition of 324 stations, an increase of 45% over 2024. As a result the process of attrition has been restarted, with rat numbers this year declining. For this and our enhanced infrastructure we must thank our donors, namely Foundation North, Auckland Council Natural Environment, the Aotea Great Barrier Local Board, the Lottery Grants Board, and the hard work of our ranger Clint Stannard.

Meanwhile the first confirmed sighting on the island of a chevron skink, one of the country's rarest reptiles, was a huge boost to morale, as was the sighting of another bellbird during the annual bird count. The health of any island ecosystem is in inverse proportion to the presence of rats. Significant progress has been made in 2025. We intend to maintain momentum in 2026. We intend to go the distance.

Mike Lee, chairperson

Bradshaws Beach on the island's northern coast. A popular picnic site for recreational boaties. Photo: Sean Clancy.

The Lodge built by the Trust and opened in 2019 is increasingly in demand.

Photo: Mike Lee.

Fletcher Beazley, DOC's new operations manager: good news for island conservation

Trust board chair Mike Lee with DOC operations manager Aotea Great Barrier Fletcher Beazley & his team at Okiwi. Left to right: Karl Fisher, Cara Fraider, Jade Williams, Fletcher Beazley, Mike Lee. Photo: Alyssia Hargest.

It's been a good-news year for Motu Kaikōura and not the least has been the return of Fletcher Beazley to Aotea. Late in 2024, Fletcher was called home by his people to be chairman of the Ngāti Rehua-Ngāti Wai ki Aotea Trust Board. Followed shortly after by what turned out to be an inspired appointment by the Department of Conservation (DOC) of Fletcher as operations manager for Aotea Great Barrier. Motu Kaikoura Trust Board chair Mike Lee first called on Fletcher at the DOC headquarters at Okiwi last February and was impressed by his enthusiasm and his determination to make a real difference for nature conservation on Aotea. Wasting no time, Fletcher, as operations manager, released his priorities agenda for DOC for 2025–26. This encompassed 'taonga species', translocations, priority ecosystems, priority plants, birds, reptiles and invertebrates, plus visitor and heritage priorities, priority campgrounds, and Iwi and community priorities. In June Fletcher oversaw the release of tieke / saddlebacks onto rat-free Rakitu. Mike and Fletcher have met several times over the past year. Fletcher has also met with the Motu Kaikoura Trust Board and visited the island twice in recent months. Mike says: 'Fletcher Beazley is a natural leader with a stellar career in front of him. A remarkable talent who clearly wants to make a difference. His enthusiastic support for Motu Kaikōura and our restoration mission is really encouraging. Watch this space.'

Discovery of rare chevron skink- a sign restoration work succeeding

The confirmed sighting of a chevron skink / niho taniwha (*Oligosoma homalonotum*) last October is a compelling indicator that our restoration effort, especially steady, long term attrition of rats, is paying off. It follows other recent sightings of reptile species known to be vulnerable to rats, namely Pacific gecko and ornate skink, both previously unrecorded on the island.

The chevron skink was spotted on the main road up from Crawford's Beach by Xyra Stannard. She was with her dad Clint who had the presence of mind to whip out his smartphone to photograph it, enabling its identity to be independenly confirmed by experts. Chevron skinks are one of New Zealand's largest skinks and one of our rarest, classified by conservation managers as 'Threatened – Nationally Vulnerable'. They have previously been found only on Hauturu / Little Barrier Island and Aotea / Great Barrier Island. A mainland population limited to the Far North of the North Island is believed to have become extinct more than 100 years ago.

Mainly insectivorous, chevron skinks also feed on the fruits of native plants. They do have some remarkable characteristics. For instance they are unusually vocal - given to grunting or squeaking if disturbed, and '*…are also known to dive into streams and hide underwater to evade predators, [being] able to hold their breath for a considerable time until the perceived danger has passed.*' (New Zealand Herpetological Society. https://www.reptiles.org.nz.)

There has been a previous report of a lizard, briefly glimpsed, answering to the description of a chevron skink but this is the first confirmed sighting on the island. Given its rarity, the presence of the chevron skink is wonderful news for conservation on Motu Kaikōura and a boost to the morale of all those involved in and supporting its restoration.

Chevron skink (Oligosoma homalonotum) – *first confirmed sighting on the island, 16 Oct 2025, by Xyra Stannard. The chevron skink is one of New Zealand's rarest reptiles. Photo: Clint Stannard.*

Calling all sea bird 'engineers' – we need you!

Seabird audio attraction station installed by ranger Clint Stannard, at the head of Taraire Valley on the southwestern side of the island, one speaker facing towards Hauturu & the other down the valley. Photo: Clint Stannard.

Burrowing seabirds, especially petrels and shearwaters, are often referred to as 'ecosystem engineers'. This is because they import nutrients from the ocean onto the land, and their burrowing aerates the soil. One of the restoration goals of the Trust is to see seabird species restored to the island. Motu Kaikōura, because of its unique location in the outer Hauraki Gulf, almost certainly was, and once restored will be again, an important breeding site for these birds. But to achieve ecosystem restoration, we need their help to get there.

To encourage these birds - for example, Cook's petrels, black petrels, grey-faced petrels and flesh-footed shearwaters - to return to breed, we sought the advice of Matt Rayner, senior researcher (land vertebrates) at Auckland Museum. With the encouragement and advice of DOC's internationally renowned seabird expert Graeme Taylor and with the assistance of Steve McKevitt from the DOC electronics lab, we recently purchased audio attraction equipment from DOC. The system broadcasts tapes of selected seabird calls to encourage passing petrels to land and hopefully to stay and breed. Before installation, trustees and ranger were given a briefing by Chris Gaskin of the Northern New Zealand Seabird Trust who has also given follow up advice to Clint. Similar systems have been successfully used in New Zealand and internationally to attract breeding seabirds to islands.
The purchase, along with a prior seabird survey of the island by Jo Sims, of Dabchick NZ and her specialist dog (no breeding sites detected) was funded by an Auckland Council Environmental and Heritage grant.

Motu Kaikōura airstrip 'Great Wall of Flax' - enhanced food source for native birds

The island's airstrip—548 m long x 40 m wide, covering 2.2 ha—is an important regional transport asset. Its maintenance, by regular mowing, gorse control, renewing equipment windsocks etc., is a high priority for the Trust. To keep the airstrip from being gradually encroached on by the surrounding tea-tree and gorse, last March after a brainstorming session between Mike and Clint we decided to delineate the perimeter with a 'wall' of flax. This would at the same time provide a significant source of nectar for pollinating native birds like tui and bellbird, important for the restoration of the island's forest ecosystem. So the airstrip will not be just for aircraft but a sort of 'airport'for forest birds as well. Using local island flax divided from existing clumps, Clint and his daughters wasted no time, planting some 1000 flaxes over the winter, almost completing the length of the perimeter. Hundreds more flax plants are growing on, sown from seeds collected last summer. Given their growth rate and the wet summer, more should be ready for planting out this winter.

The Stannard girls hard at work planting flax along the airstrip perimeter. Left to right: Xyra & Soren (in background) and Tasmyn (forground). Photo: Clint Stannard.

Bio Survey 2025

Rosemary Barraclough reports:

A group of eight participated in a conservation outcome monitoring trip (12–15 December). Our volunteers included expertise in entomology, birds, reptiles, and ecological survey. Sean Clancy trapped moths over the three nights, encountering better trapping weather than last year. Peter Maddison focussed on terrestrial invertebrates and also looked at some seashore species. Ian, Trina, Brian, David, Barbara and Rosemary conducted bird counts (using the annual counting methodology established by Mel Galbraith) and eBird counts, helped collect litter samples, contributed to general entomological sample collection, plus looked for interesting plants and general activity on the island. Brian and Rosemary also conducted searches for reptiles.

Left to right: Sean Clancy, Ian McLean, Trina Smith, Peter Maddison, Brian Gill, David Gauld, Barbara Hughes, Rosemary Barraclough. Foredeck of the Sealink ferry.

Birds. A female korimako / bellbird was sighted by Ian McLean, this followed a report of a bellbird early in 2025 by the Stannard family. Numerous pīpīwharauroa / shining cuckoo were heard across the island. We saw these several times, including around the Lodge, even though this species likes to stay hidden. Notably, a group of three were interacting noisily with each other; flying in and around a tree canopy.This was in the same place where a large group were seen displaying the same noisy group-behaviour during our December 2024 visit. Shining cuckoos primarily lay their eggs in the nests of riroriro / grey warblers, a species that is prolific on Motu Kaikōura.

Lots of kākā and kererū were seen during our visit, including during line-transect bird counts. Once again, there were also many kōtare / kingfisher, tui, riroriro / grey warbler, ruru / morepork, and pīwakawaka / fantail detected during transect counts, along with other native species and introduced species. One introduced species recorded on the island for the first time was the song thrush.

During bird counts, Trina photographed a ruru outside a long-standing nesting site in a hill-side pine tree. Ruru have been recorded nesting here as far back as 2011, when Trina first photographed nesting birds at the site.

Lots of mōhō-pererū / banded rail were seen, including juveniles. These were daily fixtures on the grass around the Lodge and elsewhere and heard within bird counts. The pond pāteke / brown teal pair had two chicks this season, plus a juvenile paradise shelduck /putangitangi (reported by Clint). We also picked up this pair in one of our counts and saw a third individual during a night-time check of Crawford Beach. Our night-time walk was to search for petrel activity, gecko/skink eye-shine, penguins, and other nocturnal activity.

Finally, with Clint's help as boatman, we surveyed kāruhiruhi / pied shag colony from the sea and confirmed that this is a mixed pied shag and kawaupaka / little shag colony. Twelve adult pied shag and four little shag were counted. Six pied shag nests were seen, of which five were active (with chicks) and one inactive. Three little shag nests were counted.

The regionally significant shag breeding colony near Pohutukawa Point. Photo: Rosemary Barraclough.

Invertebrates. The survey group collected 11 leaf-litter samples from different parts of the island and from under various canopy types (e.g. kanuka, taraire) for Peter Madison to inspect. Peter has extracted the invertebrates from the leaf-litter using funnel traps. These shine a light above the litter sample to force invertebrates downwards, seeking darkness and moisture, until they fall through a grate into a collection jar. It can easily take a full day to sort and identify invertebrates from one sample. Peter has completed five so far, yielding 149 unique specimens. Two interesting finds are an unusual *Coronadillo* slater and a rare *Myrtonomus* weevil.

Coronadillo *slater Photo from Reddit. No scalebar.*

Myrtonomus *weevil. Photo: Bioeconomy Science Institute.*

Peter reports that this is the first *Coronadillo* slater he has ever seen. There are three described in New Zealand, but we

don't know yet if this Motu Kaikōura specimen is one of these species or is something new.
Many of New Zealand's invertebrates are not yet formally described to species level. Peter also reports that the *Myrtonomus* weevil group is flightless and blind. They are the world's smallest weevils. Another find by Peter was a charming leaf-veined slug (family Athoracophoridae), whose leaf-like pattern helps to camouflage it from predators. There are at least 30 species of these slugs in New Zealand. The breathing hole, in the front part of the slug, is visible in the picture.

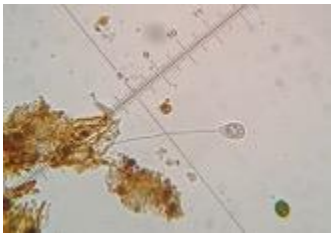
The leaf-veined slug Athoracophorus sp.
Photo: Peter Maddison.

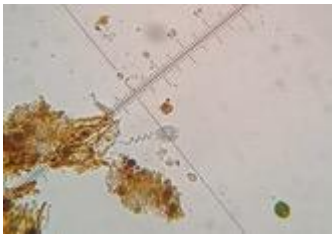
Sean Clancy reports that 117 species of moth were recorded during the visit. The three nights of light-trap surveys involved three light-traps operated at three locations in the vicinity of the Lodge (plus a few incidental diurnal records); thus a total of nine trap-catches examined and collated. Combined with the surveys in December 2024, the minimum number of species recorded to date from Motu Kaikōura stands at 152. This is an excellent return from such a necessarily restrictive survey effort, concentrated in only a small part of the island and limited to a few days at similar points in the two seasons. It indicates the invertebrate fauna on the island is already diverse, and likely to increase further as native habitats become more established and high levels of predator control are maintained.
Sean's findings include a beautiful, rare and very localised moth, *Pseudocoremia dugdalei,* recorded for the second successive season on Motu Kaikōura. Sean's final species list of moths will be available on the Motu Kaikōura website.

Bellbird / korimako (Anthornis melanura) *& morepork / ruru* (Ninox novaehollandiae). *Bellbird photo (not the one sighted): Neil Davies per favour Ian McLean, Birds NZ.*
Morepork photo: Trina Smith.

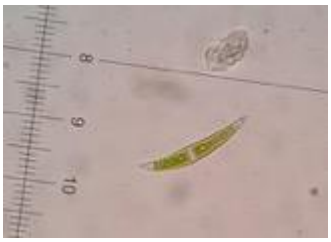
The endemic moth Pseudocoremia dugdalei. *Discovered by Stephens & Gibbs in 2003 the moth has a very limited range. Photo: Sean Clancy.*

During their surveys Barbara and David noted a lot of dragonfly and damselfly activity near the main pond, the damselflies with yellow-green heads. Damselflies are smaller and more slender than dragonflies, and when at rest their wings lay together in line with their body. At present, there are six damsel fly species in N.Z. and they are usually found close to fresh water.
Farm Pond micro-organisms. Brian Gill used a compound microscope, with magnifications of 90x and 200x, to examine six water samples taken from Motu Kaikōura's main pond. He was looking for single-celled animals (protozoa) and plants (micro-algae). He found 11 taxa that could be identified, at least to higher groupings, including three kinds of ciliate protozoa and four kinds of photosynthetic algae. A tiny green flagellate called *Lepocinclis* (in the *Euglena*-group) was multiplying to form a major element in the phytoplankton at the time of observation. Two of the photographs show a stalked ciliate protozoan in the Family Vorticellidae. It has a long contractile stalk that enables the cell to move suddenly and avoid danger. The cell body is about 40 µm long, 1 micrometre being one thousandth of a millimetre.





Stalked ciliate protozoan, extended (upper left) and contracted (upper right). At right, the desmid Closterium*, a photosynthetic green alga. Photos: Brian Gill.*



The farm pond where Brian Gill collected microscopic pond life. Photo: Brian Gill.

Other. Moko and copper skinks were sighted during this trip, and plans were developed for a comprehensive 2026 reptile survey. Botanical observations by Barbara Hughes included New Zealand gloxinia (taurepo, kaikaiatua, mata, matata, waiuatua) flowering in Taraire Valley. David Gauld also reported the presence of rimu on the island. The survey group was, again, impressed with the increasing regeneration over the island.

Sean Clancy examining collected specimens. The Lodge is a popular facility for our visitors as well as an increasingly utilised base for scientific research. Photo: Rosemary Baraclough.

We welcome old friends – Auckland Botanical Society returns to Motu Kaikoura

Back row (standing): Peter Scott, Bella Burgess, Ella Rawcliffe, Nathan Mckenzie, Maureen Young, Ewen Cameron, Mere Roberts, Geoff Davidson. Front: Jenny Chamberlain, Christine Major, Wendy John, Helen Cogle, Anne Dudley, Liz Walker. Absent Amanda Charlton. Photo: Clint Stannard.

Ewen Cameron reports:
On 23-26 January 2026, 15 members of the Auckland Botanical Society, aka 'Bot Soc', revisited the island. The hope was to land on the island, but Island Aviation said because of all the recent rain and strong winds that wasn't possible. Instead, we commuted from Okiwi airstrip, which went remarkably well. At short notice ranger Clint Stannard kindly ferried us from Port Fitzroy. Some of the team knew the island well, for others it was their first visit. The weather forecast for the weekend was bleak, including likely scattered thunderstorms for two days – but the rain held off and the team managed to stay dry investigating and enjoying the changes to the vegetation and flora over the four days.

20 years after fallow deer eradication and suppression of ship rat and kiore, everyone was really impressed with the abundance of the natural regeneration everywhere on the island. To see copious seedlings and saplings of widespread broadleaf canopy species, such as kohekohe, taraire, pūriri and rewarewa was impressive. More locally, wharangi, nīkau, tawāpou and coastal maire regeneration was present. Native shrubs and ground cover species were also thickening up. Members appreciated what a special island it is and were very thankful to be able to stay in the comfortable cabins and Lodge that the Trust manages on the island.
A few additions were made to the species list, and the intention is to publish an updated vascular plant list for Motu Kaikōura in the June 2026 issue of the *Journal of the Auckland Botanical Society.*

Editor's Note: Ewen Cameron undertook the first botanical survey of Motu Kaikoura in 1995 and has visited the island seven times. Maureen Young began her forest plot studies on the island in 2007 & has visited 13 times. Geoff Davidson was a founding member of the Motu Kaikoura Trust Board and a former chair. This was the fourth visit to the island by the Auckland Botanical Society.

Motu Kaikōura people

Ranger Clint Stannard in Man of War Passage heading for Port Fitzroy.

Their island home. The Stannard girls, Tasmyn, Xyra & Soren. Photos: Mike Lee.

The Motu Kaikoura Trust Board

Mike Lee
Chair

Michael Ngatai
Deputy Chair

Harry Doig
Treasurer

David Gauld
Secretary

Rosemary Barraclough Trustee

Chris Ollivier
Trustee

Xyra Stannard
Youth Trustee

Information for donations:

Direct credit is via our ASB Motu Kaikoura Trust account: 12 3077 0580668 00 Please contact us if you make a payment so that we can issue you with a tax deductible receipt: **motukaikoura@gmail.com**

The Motu Kaikoura Trust

Founded in 2004, the Trust Board is the administering body for the Motu Kaikoura Scenic Reserve. It is a registered charitable trust. All trustees are unpaid volunteers. The Trust has no administration staff. All monies received are invested in the island. In our mission to ecologically restore the island we welcome donations or volunteer workers.