



Matuku Hurepo: A booming future

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Report 2

During my week as a Darwin Leader, I gained insight into the threats that the Matuku hūrepo faces in Aotearoa. However, I also witnessed some of the efforts being made for their conservation and that of their home.

One of the most important initiatives is the Great Matuku-Muster, the largest coordinated monitoring of bitterns ever undertaken in Aotearoa (New Zealand). The survey is being carried out simultaneously across the country over three different days. This approach will help us avoid double-counting birds in different locations and will provide the most accurate estimations of New Zealand's bittern population to date. Many local bird conservationists and members of the community are participating in the survey, including Susan Stedman, Robyn Tearle, and Ria Kemp. The data gathered from this survey, along with data from trail cameras and acoustic recording devices, will be used to identify important wetland habitats for conservation and assess the effectiveness of existing management actions (i.e., to determine whether the bittern population is increasing or decreasing) (Alex Flavell-Johnson, 2024; Wendy Ambury, 2024).

Another significant effort for bittern protection is wetland restoration. Alex Flavell-Johnson (Bittern Conservation Trust), the expert who guided us, is one of the leaders of the wetland restoration project at the Tara Iti Golf Club. Before, most of this site was covered in pine plantations and farmland, but after just a few years of restoration, thriving wetlands have emerged where bitterns have begun to feed again (Alex Flavell-Johnson, 2024). There are also workshops, like one we attended in Whangaripo, where experts such as John Sumich (Matuku Link) teach the community how to carry out wetland restoration in their own gardens and farms.

Likewise, other crucial initiative is predator control. New Zealand's bird species, including the bittern, evolved in an environment without mammalian predators, so they have no defenses against introduced species like rats, cats, and mustelids. Predator control helps protect eggs, young bitterns, and females from these threats. During my time as a Darwin Leader, I noticed that predator control is widely embraced in New Zealand, with traps set up in nearly all the places we visited. There's even an ambitious initiative to make New Zealand predator-free by 2050 (Alex Flavell-Johnson, 2024; James, 2024).

Similarly, measures to reduce roadkill are also being implemented. We saw various road signs near wetlands that read "Slow for Bittern," and there are many efforts to educate people about their importance and why we need to protect them. For example, Wendy Ambury (Love Bittern Project) travels through Aotearoa in her van, teaching anyone who wants to listen about bittern conservation, while Susan Stedman gives talks in schools about the significance of this and other bird species. To sum up, more and more people and organizations are becoming involved in the protection of both wetlands and bitterns, providing hope that this species can be saved from extinction.



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