

Hikaroroa / Mt Watkin Conservation Group

Community Newsletter - March 2026

Kia ora koutou katoa / Hello Everyone!

It's been a while since our last newsletter because we've been so busy! Here is what we have been working on over the summer period.

The HMWCG Happenings

Since September (yes, it's been a while since our last newsletter), The Hikaroroa / Mt. Watkin Conservation Group has been involved in several events and operational activities on the land. As always, a huge thank you to all the organisations who have included us, invited us, or given a platform to share. Here are some of the highlights:

Community Engagement BBQ. Co-hosted with the East Otago Catchment Group, our event was held at the Rugby club in Waikouaiti in mid-October. Speakers shared information about water quality projects in the area, the ecology from the ocean to the mountain, and the kārearea (NZ falcon) that live on the mountain. It was also a great opportunity to update the community on the progress of the HMW Conservation Group - and to introduce the project to some community members who were previously unaware of our



efforts. The feedback from the community was very positive! Overall, more than 50 people attended and socialised together to celebrate our beautiful environment.

Guided Mountain Hikoi – On October 11th Jamie led a group of 18 interested community members of all ages on a hikoi through the Reserve. For many, it was the first opportunity to really experience the wonders at Hikaroroa. We started at the top of the mountain and walked past the boulder fields, with a stop on the ridge to survey the forest below and the

sweeping vistas out to the sea. It was a beautiful sunny day exploring the reserve! Lunch was enjoyed at a rest stop along the river at the bottom of the ravine, and then we carried on through the forest, eventually climbing back up to our starting point. It was a big hike, made more enjoyable by the community members who got to know each other and share in such a special experience!

Photo at right shows some triumphant and happy hikers at the end of the day

Field Base Developments. The shipping container donation mentioned in our last newsletter has now been installed, and fitted out as our base depot (thank you, **Port Otago** and **Waikouaiti Community Care!**). It's a great place to store our equipment!



The new storage container (above and right) and Jamie's SxS (below)

Jamie has also managed to secure a handy side-by-side vehicle to help in transporting equipment around the project area, and to help access some of the more remote trap line areas. It's already provided a great boost to the team's productivity (and saved some aching feet at the end of a long day in the field!)



Collaborative Field Trial to Study Possum Behaviour.



Three wildlife ecologists from Manaaki Whenua Landcare Research (now a group within NZ's Bioeconomy Science Institute) joined the volunteer weekend servicing the AT220 possum control network in early December. The HMWCG trap network serves as one of the field sites in which the ecologists plan to study possum behaviour as they interact with traps in real-world conditions. They have installed trail cameras throughout the AT220 network in order to monitor possum activity, with eventual plans to observe how possums respond to high-reward pre-feeding. Stay tuned for future reporting on this project! *(pictured: Dr. Becky Goodsell (NZ BSI) installing a camera)*

Waikouaiti School Trip – The sounds of excited tamariki echoed through Hikaroroa / Mt. Watkin this month as we welcomed Waikouaiti School students from Years 4–6 for what may have been the first school field trip to the reserve since it was legally established.

Students explored a newly reopened, family-friendly walking track — an old overgrown vehicle track that was recently cleared. The walk took the group right through the heart of Hikaroroa's spectacular kōwhai, ribbonwood, lacebark and broadleaf forest, giving many of the children their first chance to experience this special place.

Along the way we talked about the threats that introduced predators pose to our native wildlife, leading to some fantastic conversations about the ecological impacts of predators. The students checked predator traps, learned to identify native plants, and stopped often to listen for birdsong in the forest.

A huge thank you to Jennie from Enviroschools and Jack from the Otago Regional Council, who led fantastic freshwater sessions. The students tested stream health and water quality and even checked tuna traps, giving them a hands-on introduction to the life of the river and the importance of caring for our waterways.

The days finished down by the river at El Dorado, where camping, bonfires, rock-skipping competitions, shared kai and games made for a memorable first Hikaroroa field trip.

We hope this is just the beginning, and that many more local schools and young people will have the chance to explore and connect with the mauka in the years ahead.



(pictured: Waikouaiti School on a bush walk at Hikaroroa / Mt. Watkin Scenic Reserve)

University of Otago Wildlife Management Programme. Postgraduate students in the Wildlife Management programme at Otago Uni are working at Hikaroroa again this year. As part of their field-based learning, they are learning predator control techniques, pest and native wildlife population trend monitoring, and how to collect and analyse data from the field. HMWCG is happy to collaborate with the University to share the unique landscape and their conservation efforts with future New Zealand wildlife managers. The class will help

develop research projects to address knowledge gaps for the conservation project for their final assignment of their *Techniques in Wildlife Management* paper.

ORC Filming. Four staff from the Otago Regional Council came out to Hikaroroa / Mt. Watkin to film a promotional video about the conservation project and the ORC EcoFund grant awarded to the group in 2023.

The team captured some stunning drone footage of Hikaroroa's forests, river valleys and surrounding farmland, helping share the scale and beauty of the project with a wider audience. They also spent time filming possum trapping operations and hearing about the work being carried out across the reserve and neighbouring private land.

Keep an eye on the Otago Regional Council Facebook page and website for a short reel about our possum trapping programme, as well as a longer video showcasing the wider Hikaroroa / Mt. Watkin Conservation Project.



(Pictured: ORC Team with their mobile drone base at the reserve for filming)

Monitoring Rounds

A lot of monitoring activity has been going on in the past 6 months. Monitoring helps us check on progress over time to assess whether our control efforts are effective, or where we might need to redouble our efforts. We have also started monitoring the broader ecosystem (bird counts, invertebrates, plant species) to help us assess the broader benefits of our efforts on native biodiversity.

- **October/November Pest Monitoring.** A Pest Monitoring Workshop was held on 18-19 October, to prepare for the upcoming Monitoring Round using wax tags, tracking tunnels and cameras set across the Hikaroroa reserve and surrounding properties.
 - **One-night rodent surveys** showed an uptick in both the rat and mouse tracking results. This is most likely a seasonal fluctuation since young rodents would be emerging in the spring season.
 - **Seven-night possum surveys** also showed a slight increase in possums detected. Again, this is probably a seasonal effect in springtime, and will be carefully tracked over subsequent seasons.
 - **Camera survey** helped us track the change in detectability of stoats and cats, which both decreased sharply since Aug. This information confirms an increased detectability in winter months for adults of these species, which is when we plan to increase our control efforts.

Results from any one point in time don't mean much by themselves, but when shown as change over time they will provide useful information about how the various pest populations are responding to our collective efforts. We have compiled all the monitoring data since 2022 and will be making that available soon on our soon-to-be-launched website (stay tuned!)

- **5-Minute Bird Count Monitoring.** This season, for the first time, we extended the 5-minute bird counts onto private land and bush patches across the wider Hikaroroa area. Volunteers joined Stephen Parker (MCU field ecologist) for early morning monitoring, helping build a much clearer picture of birdlife across the whole landscape. Results were very encouraging, with strong numbers of native forest birds recorded — including some more pest sensitive species like rifleman / tītītipounamu, tomtit / miromiro across both the reserve and surrounding farmland.

One interesting finding was that brown creeper / pīpīpi were largely confined to the larger forest area within the scenic reserve; we aren't sure if this is related to habitat size / connectivity or pest presence.

This work is a big step forward in understanding how biodiversity is responding across the project area — and ensuring that wider ecological area and farmland is part of the picture.



(pictured: Naomi and Ngaio joining the 5 Minute Bird count surveys at Hikaroroa. Photo credit Stephen Parker)

- **Ungulate Monitoring.** This season we also deployed DOC's new deer and goat camera monitoring method across the project area. Cameras recorded quantitative levels of animal detectability. These results provide an important baseline dataset, allowing us to track how populations change over time and better understand the relationship between ungulate pressure and forest health.

As local hunters and contractors continue their efforts, this monitoring will be key to measuring change and guiding where future management is most needed.

- **Seedling Ratio Index.** This season also marked a milestone for our Seedling Ratio Index (SRI) monitoring, with surveys extended for the first time onto private land across the project area. SRI tracks the regeneration of preferred native species, giving us a direct measure of how well our forests are responding to ungulate management. While the data is still being processed, this work will provide a valuable baseline to assess forest recovery over time.

As we gear up to expand pig fencing and with the DCC continuing culling and control operations within the reserve, this monitoring will be key to understanding whether

reduced browsing pressure is translating into healthier, regenerating forests across the whole landscape.

- **Terrestrial Invertebrate Monitoring.** We also completed the latest round of our annual invertebrate pitfall monitoring this season. For several years now we have been collecting data on terrestrial invertebrates across the project area to better understand how they respond to pest control over time.

The monitoring is being carried out in partnership with scientists and senior rangers from the Department of Conservation, alongside a trial comparing rodent tracking rates with changes in the invertebrate community. The aim is to see whether invertebrates may provide a faster indication of the success of pest control than birds, whose populations often take much longer to respond.

By repeating this monitoring across the Hikaroroa / Mt. Watkin project area year after year, we are building an increasingly valuable long-term dataset. While we are still waiting to analyse the results in detail, we are hopeful that, with the help of a future university Masters student, we will soon be able to begin uncovering what these trends are telling us about the health of our forests and the effectiveness of our pest control programme.

Trapping

- **AT220 Possum Trapping.** A group of intrepid volunteers spent the weekend of Dec 5-7 servicing the AT220 traps, resetting and rebaiting the traps. A total of 239 possums were recorded in the traps since May, and we've successfully trapped over 1,000 possums since the project began! *Pictured: (Dave Smith resets a possum trap)*
- **Cat Trapping.** Cat trapping is gearing up! Live-capture trapping trials have begun. Fifteen trial trapboxes have been built and will soon be deployed with cameras to test our new design for automatic re-luring cat traps. Fuller deployment and knockdowns are planned towards the start of winter when feral cat roaming and trappability is at its highest.





Our trial cat traps being developed

Volunteer Spotlight

- **Helena:** Helena comes to HMWCG from Freiburg, Germany, for a 2-month internship as part of her university coursework. Studying environmental science in Germany, Helena has been amazed at the focus and efforts towards conservation and biodiversity protection she's experienced working with the HMWCG team these past months. She's



proven invaluable in helping with field work, data analysis and working with the University of Otago students. We are very grateful to have had her as part of our ongoing regular team and wish her the best as she continues her education in Australia before heading back home to Germany. We know she'll be a great ambassador for our project!

Upcoming Events and Fieldwork

- **April 11: DCC Reserve Trapping Day**
- **April 12th: Whanau- Friendly Hikoi at Hikaroroa**
- **April 18th: DOC200 Introductory trapping training day**
- **May 2: AT220 Training Workshop**
- **May 8-10th: AT220 Network Service** – Possum Trapping 3-day trip. This is always a fun weekend, with a chance to improve your trapping skills, while enjoying good food and community.

(Any updates, date changes, or additional info will be posted on our [facebook](#) events page!)

Volunteers Needed!

We're always looking for new volunteers to join us! Anyone with a desire to spend time outdoors, with at least a moderate level of fitness is welcome to come along to our training events, and then join us in the field. (Level of fitness will determine the nature of field work you can help support, but *anyone* can do *something* – so don't hesitate to join us).

For general volunteering opportunities we are looking for more people who can commit to regular trapping days (about once a month / every other month), or are available to be trained and come on our multi-day advanced trapping / monitoring trips. See training and trapping events noted above in the ***Upcoming Events and Fieldwork***.

Other volunteer opportunities include helping with:

- Feral cat trapping research trial.
- Terrestrial invertebrate research project.
- Media, storytelling, photography
- Data analysis

Our momentum is strong and ongoing – thanks to each and every volunteer, supporter, and partner. Whether you've been checking traps, attending hui, or lending behind-the-scenes support, everyone's contributions make a real difference.

Kā mihi nui,

Jamie Hickling

Project Coordinator – HMWCG

The group is still looking for leaders and volunteers to get involved. If you are interested in being involved, please email us for more information: HMWconservationgroup@gmail.com

Feel free to forward this email to anyone who might like to read it. If you want to know more about anything specific in this issue, please reach out. If you have been forwarded this email, you can sign up for our Newsletter by reaching out via email.

A huge thank you to all of our funding providers and collaborators!



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Te Papa Atawhai

