NZVA
New Zealand Veterinary Association
Te Pae Kirehe

WILDLIFE VETERINARIANS of the NZVA

WILDLIFE BRANCH OF THE NZVA

Wildlife Connect

October 2025

President's Message

Spring has arrived, and with it we can hopefully look forward to some warmer days and brighter evenings.

Following last year's successful conference in Palmerston North, we're excited to share that this year's conference will be hosted by the Dunedin Wildlife Hospital in late October (see below for more details).

Two monetary grants are once again open for applications:

- **The Wildlife Branch Grant** supports veterinarians wishing to further develop their skills in working with native New Zealand wildlife.
- **The Marion Cunningham Memorial Fund Grant** is awarded to students undertaking research that is practical and relevant to current wildlife issues. Further information can be found on the NZVA website.

We also wish to acknowledge the contributions of **Kate McInnes** and **Kelly Buckle**, who have stepped down from the committee after many years of dedicated service. Kate has brought a wealth of clinical knowledge and perspective to our discussions, while Kelly has added energy, insight, and expertise from her role within MPI. On behalf of the committee, thank

you both for your commitment and enthusiasm—you will be missed, and we look forward to catching up at future conferences (or perhaps seeing you return to the committee after a well-earned break!).

Our current committee members are:

- Sam Lee
- James Chatterton
- Mint Bhetraratana
- Kerri Morgan
- Harry Taylor
- Kate Pickard
- Samantha Howarth
- Rachel Stanyer

With Kate and Kelly's departure, we are delighted to welcome **Rachel Stanyer (DOC)** to the committee.

Enjoy the longer evenings and articles below. I look forward to seeing you all in Dunedin at the annual conference!

Ngā mihi,
Sam Lee

DOC's Bird Flu Vaccine Trial a Success

An internationally significant research trial carried out by the Department of Conservation shows vaccination can safely be used to protect some of New Zealand's most threatened birds from virulent bird flu should it arrive here.

The H5N1 strain of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) has spread globally, causing severe impacts on wild and domestic birds as well as mammals such as seals and sea lions. However, it has not yet reached Oceania, including New Zealand, Australia, and the Pacific Islands.

DOC is working with the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI), the Ministry of Health and Health New Zealand | Te Whatu Ora as part of a One Health approach to preparing for the possible arrival of H5N1 in New Zealand.

DOC carried out the intensive year-long trial on captive birds from five endangered species – kākāpō, takahē, kakī/black stilt, tūturuatu/shore plover and kākāriki/parakeet – to see if the

bird flu vaccine would be an effective tool to help prevent species loss during a disease outbreak.

Up to 10 birds from each species were given two doses of the vaccine one month apart, followed by regular health assessments and blood tests to monitor their health and development of antibodies.

DOC Senior Science Advisor and wildlife vet, Kate McInnes, says the trial was a success and all the study birds responded well to the vaccine.

“We now know for at least five of our most critically endangered bird species the vaccine will work to protect them from the highly contagious H5N1 virus.

“We knew it had been successfully used in overseas zoos previously, but we didn’t know how effective it would be on New Zealand’s unique native birds, which are found nowhere else in the world.”

While four of the species had a strong response over six months, in kakī antibody levels dropped at three months, showing the need for a different vaccine regime for this species. If the H5N1 strain of bird flu arrives in New Zealand and spreads in wild birds, we won’t be able to eradicate it, and management options will be limited, says Kate McInnes.

“We will do everything we can through strict biosecurity to prevent threatened birds in captive facilities and managed populations being exposed to the virus, but the vaccine will give us an extra layer of protection.

“It won’t be possible to vaccinate all our endangered birds, but we can focus on species in captivity where the full two doses of the vaccine can be given.”

The bird species in the trial are all critically endangered with populations just in the hundreds. Red-crowned kākāriki was used as a stand-in for the rarer kākāriki karaka/orange-fronted kākāriki, which is also highly threatened.

MPI approved the trial using Poulvac Flufend RG vaccine, which was carried out under strictly controlled conditions. The vaccine contains dead low-pathogenicity virus and cannot cause bird flu infection.

The research was led by DOC technical experts and involved assistance and support from iwi and hapū, captive facilities, international vets, specialist vet and diagnostic services PacificVet and BioPacifica Laboratories, Zoetis, and MPI.

It’s the first trial in the world to involve five species over a year and the internationally significant results will be published in a science paper. The research has been shared with Australian agencies to help with their vaccination planning and research.

DOC is working with MPI on a broader vaccination plan for the five species and potentially others that might also benefit if bird flu reaches Aotearoa.

Early detection of H5N1 if it arrives here will be crucial. The public are asked to keep a watch out for signs of bird flu and report groups of three or more sick or dead birds, marine mammals or other wildlife to the MPI exotic pest and disease hotline: 0800 80 99 66. Do not touch, handle, or collect dead or dying birds to avoid spread of the virus and protect yourself.

Background information

DOC is developing plans to reduce risks to threatened species in captive facilities and managed populations, should H5N1 bird flu arrive in New Zealand, including actions to enhance detection through increased awareness, reduce transmission via people and equipment, and protect threatened species.

The focus will be on minimising spread on public conservation land through strong biosecurity practices and not disturbing wildlife, and supporting the health and resilience of threatened bird populations through conservation work such as breeding and predator control programmes.

Avian influenza: Wildlife health

Department of Conservation

DOC vet Kate McInnes (left) vaccinating a kakī/black stilt, held by DOC ranger Serena O'Brien (right), during the HPAI vaccine trial. *Photo by Carla Smit of PacificVet; source: Department of Conservation.*

DISEASE

Avian Cholera Mortalities in Hoiho

Adult hoiho. *Photo: Harry Taylor.*

During the 2023/24 breeding season, a small outbreak of avian cholera occurred in hoiho/yellow-eyed penguins (*Megadyptes antipodes*) in Otago. As most of our readers will be aware, hoiho are endangered, with the small northern population (South Island and Rakiura/Stewart Island) declining year-on-year, meaning any mortality event is potentially catastrophic for this population. As a result, a joint investigation involving MPI, DOC, Dunedin Wildlife Hospital, and Massey University Wildbase Pathology was launched to determine the cause of these deaths and assess whether it was an emerging threat to hoiho. In total, six hoiho were affected with histology confirming death from septicaemia and bacterial culture identifying *Pasteurella multocida*, the causative agent of avian cholera, as the pathogen responsible for the deaths. One of the isolates was submitted to MPI's lab for whole-genome sequencing in an attempt to determine the source; however, the genome of the isolate did not match any previously sequenced isolates in databases and a source could not be identified.

Adult hoiho with chick. *Photo: Harry Taylor.*

Although avian cholera has been previously reported in other penguin species, these are the first reported cases of *P. multocida* in hoiho. Hoiho do not nest in dense colonies, and direct contact between birds outside of breeding pairs is irregular, making this case series an unusual presentation for avian cholera. The loss of six individuals, including three of breeding age, will have a significant impact on the mainland hoiho population, and the potential for further losses to avian cholera cannot be discounted (although none were reported this season). This investigation illustrates the benefits of multiagency collaboration in monitoring for, and investigation of, potentially new and emerging diseases in threatened species. The investigation was recently described in an article in the *Journal of Wildlife Disease*, and is available here – Taylor et al. 2025 (note that this article is behind a paywall).

Harry Taylor

Notices

NOTICES

NZVA 2025 Wildlife Conference

The Future of Hoiho and Other Endemic Species in Aotearoa

31 October – 2 November 2025 | Distinction Hotel, Dunedin

The NZVA Wildlife Branch warmly invites you to Dunedin for the 2025 Annual Wildlife Conference: *The Future of Hoiho and Other Endemic Species in Aotearoa*. This year's programme will highlight exciting new research in wildlife conservation, with a particular focus on the critically endangered hoiho/yellow-eyed penguin. Alongside this, clinicians can look forward to talks designed for veterinarians in practice, covering avian triage, stabilisation, initial diagnostics, and practical anaesthesia tips.

Beyond the lecture hall, delegates will enjoy two exceptional field trips showcasing the natural beauty and unique wildlife of Coastal Otago. The first excursion is a guided walk at Orokonui Ecosanctuary – Te Korowai o Mihiwaka, a predator-free haven where native species thrive across 307 hectares of restored forest. Home to rare and endangered wildlife, Orokonui offers visitors a peaceful encounter with nature under the guardianship of Kāti Huirapa Rūnaka ki Puketeraki.

The second field trip combines a Monarch Wildlife Cruise with a visit to the Otago Peninsula Eco Restoration Alliance (aka The OPERA). On the *Monarch*, you'll explore the rugged coastline of Otago Harbour, with chances to spot pakake/New Zealand sea lions basking on tidal flats, kekeno/New Zealand fur seals on rocky outcrops, and toroa/northern royal albatross from the world's only mainland colony soaring overhead. The journey also offers glimpses of dolphins, penguins, and other seabirds, accompanied by expert commentary on the region's natural and cultural history.

Following the cruise, delegates will tour The OPERA's private eco-reserve—home to hoiho, kororā/little penguins, pakake, and native birdlife. The 1.5-hour experience begins with an introduction to ongoing conservation work, followed by a guided walk through restored habitats, offering close encounters with some of Aotearoa's most iconic and threatened species.

To round off the conference, delegates will gather at Etrusco at the Savoy for the conference dinner—an authentic five-course Italian banquet shared in good company.

Join colleagues, researchers, and conservationists this October in Dunedin for a programme that blends cutting-edge research, clinical learning, and unforgettable wildlife experiences in one of New Zealand's most spectacular regions.

Samantha Howarth

Coming Soon: NZVA Guidance for New Zealand General Practice Veterinarians on High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza (HPAI)

The NZVA is soon to release a guidance document for general practice vets about HPAI and wildlife. Wildlife Branch members contributed to the content, and at the time this newsletter goes out for distribution, the document is due to be published very soon. See the NZVA website for further information.

Wildlife Branch Grant

Are you interested in improving your skills and/or knowledge in treating wildlife?!

Every year the Wildlife Branch of the NZVA awards the Wildlife Branch Grant with the purpose of supporting vets to partake in continuing professional development in any area of wildlife medicine. This grant can be used to fund a wide array of activities—previous grants have been used for practical placements, online courses, research, and practice-based wildlife disease investigations. If you have an idea that will either improve your ability as a wildlife vet or will benefit our knowledge of wildlife disease, please apply!!

All vets are eligible to apply and the 2025 grant is valued at $2,500. Applications are open for two months starting from the 1st of September and applying is easy—simply fill in the application form telling us what you want to do with the money!

For more information and the application form please see the Wildlife Branch page of the NZVA website (Wildlife Annual Grants » New Zealand Veterinary Association (nzva.org.nz)) or get in touch with us at wildlife@vets.org.nz.

Snippets

New Strain of Canine Distemper Virus Found in Kekeno/New Zealand Fur Seals

A divergent strain of canine distemper virus (CDV) had been discovered in kekeno/New Zealand fur seals. Current evidence indicates this is not a new introduction to New Zealand, but instead a previously undetected strain. There is no known risk to human health from this strain.

DOC, Biosecurity New Zealand, and Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa Massey University are collaborating to uncover what this discovery, which was made during an exotic disease investigation, means for kekeno. Initially testing for HPAI—a potential threat to seals and sea lions as well as birds—the investigation instead revealed the presence of the divergent CDV strain during a mass mortality event in Kaikōura in the spring of 2024. This event followed another that occurred in the spring of 2023; however, CDV was not detected during the first event, the cause of which was found to be starvation.

"New Zealand Fur seal." by Bernard Spragg is marked with CC0 1.0.

Dr Jodi Weir, a DOC senior technical advisor and one of the scientists involved in the study, said the discovery of this emerging disease in kekeno highlights their importance as a sentinel species, indicating the wider health of the marine ecosystem. "Most New Zealanders don't realise how bad the situation is," Dr Weir says. "Around 80 percent think our nature is in good shape, but sadly that just isn't the case. While kekeno are currently categorized as "not threatened", a virus like this one could have large-scale impacts on populations."

You can read the full story here.

Emergency Set Net Fishing Ban to Protect Hoiho

The government has brought in an emergency three-month ban on set netting around the Otago Peninsula to protect hoiho/yellow-eyed penguins. Hoiho are vulnerable to accidental capture and death in set net fisheries operations: figures from Seafood NZ and the Ministry for Primary Industries data indicate 17 hoiho were killed in fishery incidents between October 2019 and June 2025, mostly as bycatch in set nets. According to the Environmental Law Initiative (ELI), a further three fisheries-related hoiho deaths occurred in the second quarter of this year.

DOC data show that the northern hoiho population (South Island and Rakiura/Stewart Island) declined steeply by 80% since 2008, from 739 breeding pairs to 143. The northern population is considered to be on the brink of collapse, and organisations such as the Yellow-eyed Penguin Trust/Te Tautiaki Hoiho and the ELI had been calling on the government for a set net ban to be put in place for the hoiho's breeding season, which began in August. Although the ELI welcomed the temporary ban, it said the rest of the northern population remained unprotected, and further measures are needed.

A four nautical mile set net ban was already in place; however, conservation groups argued that this was inadequate because hoiho forage up to 20 nautical miles from the coast.

You can read the full story here (and for more hoiho news, see the article *Avian Cholera Mortalities in Hoiho* earlier in this issue).

Conference Notices

NZVA 2025 Wildlife Conference: The Future of Hoiho and Other Endemic Species in Aotearoa

31 October – 2 November 2025
Dunedin
https://www.nzvaevents.org.nz/25wild

Wildlife Disease Association Australasian Section Conference 2025

28 September – 3 October 2025
Adelaide Hills, SA, Australia
https://www.wda-a.org/

Association of Avian Veterinarians Australasian Committee (AAVAC) 2025 Conference

17–20 November 2025
Lamington National Park, Queensland, Australia
https://www.aavac.com.au/conference_2025

Australasian Ornithological Conference 2025

18–20 November 2025
Boorloo/Perth, WA, Australia
https://aoc.org.au/

Australasian Wildlife Management Society (AWMS) Annual Conference 2025

2–4 December 2025
Queenstown, New Zealand
https://awms.org.au/conference/

Contacts

WILDLIFE BRANCH OF THE NZVA
Website: https://www.nzva.org.nz/branches/wildlife/
Email: wildlife@vets.org.nz

BIRDS NEW ZEALAND – Te Kāhui Mātai Manu o Aotearoa
For information about ornithological research in New Zealand, including the New Zealand Bird Atlas Scheme
https://www.birdsnz.org.nz/

DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION – Te Papa Atawhai
0800 DOC HOT (0800 362 468)
To report conservation law infringements, injured or sick wildlife (1–2 animals, for 3 or more call the MPI pest and disease hotline), and whale or dolphin strandings

FOREST & BIRD – Te Reo o te Taiao
For information about wildlife conservation and advocacy in New Zealand
https://www.forestandbird.org.nz/

MPI EXOTIC PEST AND DISEASE HOTLINE
0800 809 966
To report a suspected exotic pest or disease of plants or animals

NEW ZEALAND CENTRE FOR CONSERVATION MEDICINE (NZCCM) – Te Rōpu Taiao Rongoa o Aotearoa
Auckland Zoo, Auckland
Phone: +64 9 360 3805

SPCA
For information about wildlife-related welfare issues (e.g., feeding birds, the dangers of fishing tackle, etc.)
https://www.spca.nz/advice-and-welfare/category?cat=animals-in-the-wild

THE NEST TE KŌHANGA, WELLINGTON ZOO
Wellington Zoo Trust, Wellington
Email: The.Nest@wellingtonzoo.com
Phone: +64 4 803 0764

WILDBASE HOSPITAL – Hōhipera ki Te Whakahaumanu
Veterinary Teaching Hospital, Massey University, Palmerston North
Email: wildbase@massey.ac.nz
Phone: +64 6 350 5329
Freephone: 0800 738 363

WILDBASE PATHOLOGY – Tahumaero ki Te Whakahaumanu
Wildlife Pathology Submission Form
Link: https://www.massey.ac.nz/about/clinics-and-services-for-the-public/wildbase/wildbase-pathology/how-to-submit-a-specimen-to-wildbase-pathology/#Submissionform
Hard Copy Link: https://www.massey.ac.nz/documents/415/Wildlife-pathology-request.pdf
Email: wildbase@massey.ac.nz
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