



# Life on the wing: Waiheke's birds face many hazards

Writer Anthony McNamara talks with Karen Saunders and island veterinarian Dr Bryan Gartrell about their work caring for injured native birds at Waiheke's Native Bird Rescue headquarters. Photos Karen Saunders

private donations to pay for the medical supplies, specialist equipment and much needed expansion and development. Many island businesses have already helped where they can with Placemakers and New Generation both donating essential items, Tickled Pink offered painting services and Kasey Coghlan, of Ox Tackle, even offered to go out and catch baitfish when they were inundated with juvenile blue penguins late last year.

There was a sense of calm before a literal storm when I recently visited Waiheke's Native Bird Rescue headquarters near Rocky Bay to have a look around the facilities. It quickly became obvious that there is a great deal more to looking after injured wild birds than a warm cardboard box and a bit of cat food.

Karen Saunders and veterinarian Dr Bryan Gartrell tell me of the possibility of an influx of casualties as a front of bad weather edges its way toward the island. It has the potential to leave many birds suffering from the effects of the high winds and the cold and rain.

"We'll probably get some traumas from birds striking light poles and cables in the wind and we might see some sea birds coming in that are very weak and out of condition because they've not been able to feed. Fighting the cold weather will have used up all of their energy reserves. We could end up having a very busy week this week."

Founder Karen tells me that they work on all native birds from the smallest warblers to the largest hawks and giant petrels and each bird has a completely different set of needs, especially when it comes to food. Pointing out a large tub of writhing mealworms she explains that some are insectivores while others will only eat fruits and vegetables. The seabirds naturally need lots of fresh fish and fish oils.

The rescue service is run entirely by volunteers who rely on

"Te Matuku are very good to us, they've donated fresh fish when we've have seabirds, which is a real help because the feed is one of our biggest costs."

Karen runs the day to day operation with regular veterinary support from Bryan, and has done so since receiving her specialist training in the delicacies of caring for and treating injured birds. She tells me that the care is very labour intensive and 16-hour days are not uncommon in the summer. "We do have great volunteers like Hue Ross and John Finn but the training is really hard; the learning curve is steep and the responsibilities are huge. The day is filled with countless little decisions that are life and death to these creatures. We're constantly assessing and reacting to their needs."



Top – A short stay ruru. Above – Karen Saunders in the cramped critical care room. Above right – Native Bird Rescue vet Bryan Gartrell examines a northern giant petrel.



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