

The hidden wildlife of Ō2NL

Highway wildlife rescue reveals hidden ecology along Ōtaki to North of Levin Project.

Ashleigh Collis

When excavators moved into a muddy roadside pond near Sorensen's Rd, ecologists thought they had already rescued most of the wildlife living there.

They were wrong.

Workers had initially trapped 43 eels from the small pond as part of the Ōtaki to north of Levin (Ō2NL) highway project. But as excavation began, more and more eels emerged from deep mud.

"By the end of it, 118 eels came out of this little pond," Ō2NL Northern Alliance Lead Ecologist Caitlin Lavery said.

"Most of them were tiny, only just bigger than glass eels."

The discovery is one of dozens of unexpected wildlife stories emerging from the massive highway project, where ecologists have found breeding skinks beside State Highway 1, rescued giant longfin eels from streams and watched threatened birds establish themselves in wetlands created during construction.

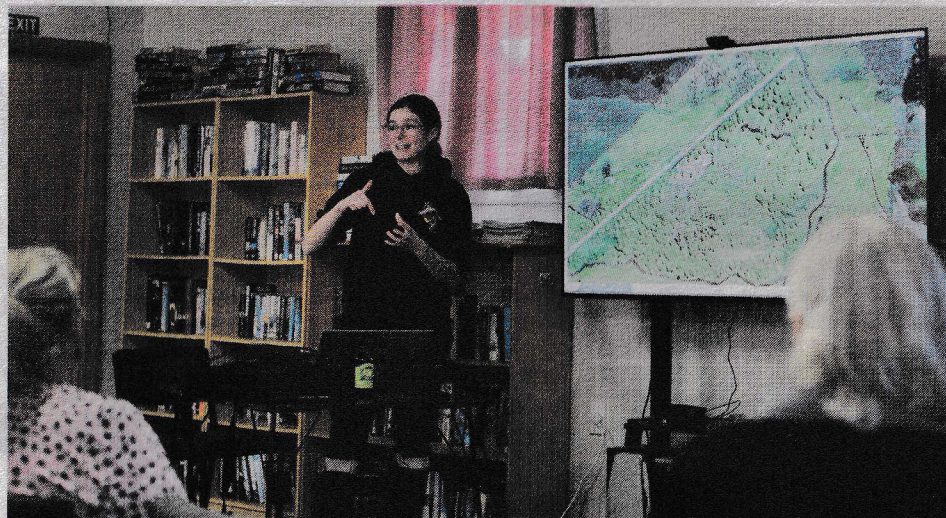
Speaking during a public presentation on the project's environmental programme, Lavery said the findings had revealed how many native species were quietly surviving in places most people would never expect.

One of the most exciting discoveries was evidence that native grass skinks were breeding in roadside drains and grass verges directly alongside SH1.

"We were really, really excited," she said.

"All of the grass skinks we were finding were similar sizes, but then we found this tiny little guy whose body was only 4.5 centimetres long. That told us they're breeding there."

The juvenile skink was relocated with others to a specially protected predator-proof reserve established as part of the



ABOVE: Ō2NL Northern Alliance Lead Ecologist Caitlin Lavery speaks to a community gathering about the extensive wildlife rescue, relocation and wetland restoration work being carried out alongside the Ōtaki to north of Levin highway project. PHOTO/ ASHLEIGH COLLIS

greatest threats to native lizards.

"When you take away the stoats, the rats go crazy, and when you take away the rats, the mice are generally the last ones standing," she said.

The ecological programme extends beyond reptiles and fish. Stick insects, wētā and other native invertebrates are regularly relocated ahead of vegetation clearance, while stormwater ponds and temporary wetlands created during construction have become habitat for native birds.

One unexpected visitor was a New Zealand dabchick, a threatened native diving bird.

"I reversed my vehicle because I thought, 'that's not a duck'," Lavery said.

Birds nesting within active construc-

tion areas have also presented challenges. Pīpīwhararua, pūkeko and dotterels have all adapted to construction environments, sometimes nesting alongside heavy machinery.

"They will nest in the absolute middle of a construction site," Lavery said.

Beyond wildlife rescue, the project is also undertaking large-scale wetland restoration to meet environmental offset requirements.

Part of that work focuses on restoring degraded wetlands overtaken by invasive reed canary grass near the Kāpiti rail corridor and surrounding reserves. The wetlands provide habitat for species including mudfish, spotless crane, bitterns and giant land snails.

Lavery described the restoration pro-



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gramme as "a huge undertaking", involving aerial spraying, mulching, hydrology improvements and long-term native planting.

Environmental monitoring continues across the project, including monthly water-quality testing and sediment controls designed to prevent runoff entering waterways.

While construction and ecology are often seen as opposing forces, Lavery said many workers genuinely cared about protecting wildlife.

"I always make sure I pass on the information. I never set them up to fail," she said.

Asked what inspired her to become an ecologist, her answer was simple.

"I really like animals, and I really like being outside."

project.

Lavery said many people assume young skinks require parental care, but reptiles generally fend for themselves from birth.

"There's no parental care generally in skinks and geckos, so this little guy is on his own," she said.

The eel discoveries did not stop at Sorensen's Rd.

While working around temporary culverts, ecologists discovered more than 85 longfin eels in a small stream.

"The biggest one we got was 6.6 kilos and 1.25 metres long," Lavery said.

"It was the best day ever."

Longfin eels are nationally declining and hold significant cultural importance for iwi.

Many rescued animals are being relocated into protected habitat surrounded by predator-proof fencing and supported by intensive trapping programmes targeting rats, stoats, possums, mice and rabbits.

Lavery said mice remained one of the



ABOVE: Lead ecologist Caitlin Lavery holds a glossy brown skink rescued during the Ōtaki to north of Levin (Ō2NL) highway project. SUPPLIED



ABOVE: Earthworks underway near Sorensen's Rd as construction continues on the Ōtaki to north of Levin (Ō2NL) expressway project. The area has also been the focus of extensive ecological rescue work, including the relocation of native fish, eels and lizards. SUPPLIED