

MAGICAL MANAWATŪ

Joan Leckie helped put the Manawatū Estuary on the global map 20 years ago. Our Horowhenua Branch volunteers are still helping look after this important wetland today. **✍️ Caroline Wood**

As Chair of Horowhenua Branch, Joan devoted three years preparing and promoting the case for 200ha hectares of river and adjoining wetland at Foxton to be recognised as a globally important biodiversity hotspot.

She submitted the application to the Department of Conservation, and, in September 2005, the Manawatū Estuary was declared a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention on the Protection of Wetlands. Joan went on to establish and become the first chair of the Manawatū Estuary Trust.

The Ramsar site included a beautiful wetland area called Fernbird Flat, where rare wetland birds such as māātā fernbird and kororeke marsh crane still persisted, safe from the widespread drainage that had claimed most coastal wetlands by the turn of the last century.

"Around 2000, I helped establish the Manawatū Estuary Trust and was involved with the move to clean up the Manawatū River," said Joan.

"Ramsar status allows the wetland to be valued and protected but still used wisely for recreation by all the different groups which enjoy the estuary – the birdwatchers, the boaties, the recreational fishers, and those taking their daily exercise."

Today, Papangaio Te Wharangi Manawatū Estuary is one of

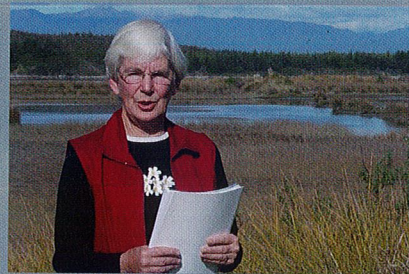
the most significant estuaries remaining on the southwest coast of the North Island. At different times of year, hundreds of wading birds can be seen, including kōtuku ngutupapa royal spoonbills, tūturiwhatu New Zealand dotterels, and poaka pied stilts.

March is when the kuaka godwits and other migratory wading birds wing their way back to Alaska and Siberia to breed – an annual reminder of the global significance of the Manawatū Estuary.

It's also an important site for ngutuparore wrybill, who overwinter at the wetland each year before returning to their breeding grounds on Canterbury's braided rivers.

Joan's successful Ramsar application was supported by many organisations and individuals, including local iwi, the Department of Conservation, Horowhenua District Council, Horizons Regional Council, Otaki MP Darren Hughes, farmers, and schools. Today, these same groups are still involved in helping to look after the wetland.

In March, the Manawatū Estuary Management Team held a special event in Foxton to celebrate the highly anticipated launch of the Papangaio Te Wharangi Manawatū Estuary Management Plan 2025–2035. The Trust says it is the first organisation in Aotearoa to future-proof a Ramsar site.



Joan Leckie in 2005, Manawatū Estuary. .
📷 Forest & Bird archives

Forest & Bird's Horowhenua Branch supported the development of the plan, which includes a focus on restoring water quality for native fish and carrying out pest control to protect the declining birdlife.

Joan attended the event together with Horowhenua Branch chair Geoff Ritchie, while our Manawatū Branch was represented by former chair Anthea McClelland.

Manawatū Estuary Management Team chair Brett Russell, Horowhenua Māori ward councillor Justin Tamihana, and Reihana Adlam of Ngāti Raukawa lifted a korowai cloak to symbolise the beginning of the plan.

Justin Tamihana said all the groups involved were committed to continue the work to maintain the beautiful taonga treasure.

To find out more about Manawatū Estuary and see the new management plan, go to www.metrust.org.nz.

Kuaka bar-tailed godwits, Manawatū Estuary. 📷 Rob Scotcher

