

## An island getaway for the birds

Kath Kovac

**Twelve years ago, kikuyu grass was wreaking havoc on the seabird habitat of Montague Island, nine kilometres from the southern New South Wales coast. Revegetation programs have since started to push back the weed front. In February this year, *ECOS* joined a group of 16 volunteers from Narooma to find out what effect the weed invasion and revegetation are having on the island's avian inhabitants.**



Credit: Kath Kovac

Buffeted by wind and lashed with rain, Montague Island is a lonely place, exposed to the elements and isolated from the mainland. But, it's also beautiful: a welcome refuge from city roads, traffic and crowds.

Barunguba, as it was known by the Aboriginal people of the Walbanga and Djiringanj lands across the water, was once a fertile hunting ground where an abundance of seabird eggs, muttonbirds and penguins could be gathered.

Declared a nature reserve in 1990 and managed since by the New South Wales National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS), the island remains a breeding ground for thousands of pairs of seabirds, including the world's third-largest colony of little penguins.

Shearwaters – wedge-tailed, short-tailed and sooty – crested terns, rails, sooty oystercatchers and silver gulls also make their home here, while regular visitors include sea eagles and peregrine falcons.

---



Credit: Photo: Stuart Cohen

### **War on weeds**

The island's grey granite lighthouse – first occupied in 1881 and now fully solar-powered and automated – is where we begin our adventure.

Over the howl of the wind tearing viciously around our viewing platform, NPWS tour guide, Jesse Pumphrey, tells us how the weed causing the biggest problem for birdlife on the island – kikuyu grass (*Pennisetum clandestinum*) – was introduced by lighthouse keepers as fodder for goats and other livestock. Once the goats were removed in the 1990s, the thickly matted grass started to spread and encroach on seabird habitat.

‘The kikuyu forms an impenetrable wall for little penguins,’ explains Mr Pumphrey. ‘When they leave the nest the first time, the penguins may try and cross the whole island before they find the ocean.’

‘If they do find a way through, the kikuyu can wrap around their feet, deforming them. The penguins can also get trapped in the grass and starve to death.’



Credit: Kath Kovac

Boyd Hastings, NPWS Field Officer Guide on the island for more than 20 years, agrees that kikuyu is the main problem – but not the only one.

‘When you get rid of the kikuyu, you open up the country to all sorts of other weeds and seeds.

‘It’s a never-ending battle. There’s cape ivy, climbing dock (*Kennedia rubicundra*), other native vines and creepers – there’s a million and one other species here that want to be dominant.’

NPWS staff have been clearing kikuyu by spraying with glyphosate (‘Roundup’), followed by burning to remove grass ‘mats’ up to one metre high. They then plant a mix of native shrubs and trees, and continue with regular follow-up spraying.

The kikuyu removal forms part of NPWS’ Seabird Habitat Restoration Project, which has been running on Montague Island since 2004. Helped along by an accidental burn in 2001, a large area from near the lighthouse to the wharf where tourist and NPWS boats dock has been successfully cleared of kikuyu and replanted, providing plenty of suitable seabird habitat.

Across the island’s seven management zones, about 60 000 native seedlings have been planted so far, with mat-rush (*Lomandra longifolia*) the species most preferred by seabirds.

‘It’s good penguin habitat and shearwater habitat – both create nests underneath,’ says Mr Hastings. Found across much of the island, the *Lomandra* bushes are like spiky balls, their long leaves poking up and bending groundwards to form protected seabird hidey-holes.

Other species planted as part of the revegetation program include *Westringia fruticosa* (coastal rosemary), *Melaleuca armillaris* (bracelet honey myrtle), *Allocasuarina verticillata* (drooping sheoak) and *Acacia sophorae* (coastal wattle).

Mr Hastings has found tree species useful for opening up the island’s vegetation. ‘The melaleuca’s been pretty good, and the banksia has worked well. Anything that can grow high and big and shade out the kikuyu is beneficial.’

According to the NPWS, revegetation of the island has seen the shearwater population stabilise, while crested tern and little penguin numbers have risen slightly.



Credit: Kath Kovac

### **Local gardeners to the rescue**

Relying solely on volunteers, the habitat restoration project has been moving at a slow but steady pace. The 16 volunteers who visited in February – all but two of whom are members of the Narooma District Community Gardens, Inc. – have been the largest group to date.

The trip came about when the community garden’s organiser, Carolyn Wells, met NPWS officer Cassandra Bendixsen, a member of the Parents & Citizens’ Association at Narooma Public School where a community garden project was to be based.

As a result of the meeting, the two women organised for a gardening group to visit the island – a 15-minute boat trip from the coastal town of Narooma – with the aim of planting 8000 seedlings in five days.

On the first day, volunteers managed to plant about 1500 seedlings. The next morning, I joined their efforts to dig in another 1000 seedlings before poor weather set in, preventing further planting. While half the group repaired back to Narooma, eight remained to continue the job, planting a total of 4000 seedlings before further rain grounded all activities.



Credit: Kath Kovac

The group plans to return to the island for day trips to continue planting. As Mr Hastings explains, continuity is important to the success of the revegetation program.

‘After spraying, we’ve got a window of about two months before we start to lose out on the kikuyu again,’ he says. In some places, grass has been sprayed but, as he laments, ‘we haven’t always had the people required to plant it out in time.’

However, Ms Bendixsen is confident the revegetation program will continue to secure funding. ‘It would be an incredible shame to not maintain the work that has been done on the island,’ she says.

*Kath Kovac visited Montague Island at the invitation of New South Wales NPWS.*

From ECOS online <http://www.ecomagazine.com/?paper=EC12229>