

Statement by Prof. John Cockrem

Expert statement by Prof. John Cockrem submitted to Department of Conservation, Sept 2021

Adverse effects of dogs on birds

Professor John Cockrem (PhD)
Massey University
Palmerston North

I am a professional ornithologist with 45 years of experience of studying birds in New Zealand. I have worked with many species of birds during my academic career, and am a Professor at Massey University in Palmerston North. I contribute to national and international ornithological organisations, and conduct bird research around New Zealand. I have been an expert witness at Environment Protection Authority hearing, and provide consultancy advice about birds to local councils and to other organisations.

1. Effects of dogs on birds

- The adverse effects of human disturbance of birds and other wildlife is a problem that is not yet well recognised in New Zealand (Wallace, 2016).
- Dogs are predators and have adverse effects on birds and other wildlife (Holderness-Roddam and McQuillan, 2014).
- Dogs that are not under control are a conservation problem around the world (Hughes and Macdonald, 2013).
- Dogs that are not on a leash will run at birds and kill birds that they catch.
- Walking with a dog on leash can disturb birds (Banks and Bryant, 2007), especially coastal birds (Lord et al., 2001; Schlacher et al., 2013; Wallace, 2016).
- A study in Australia showed that there was a 40% reduction in the presence of birds adjacent to forest paths where dogs walk on leashes in comparison with paths where dogs were absent (Banks and Bryant, 2007).

Birds perceive dogs to be threats and actively try to avoid them (Weston and Stankowich, 2014). For example, New Zealand dotterels move off their nests when humans and potential predators approach (Dowding and Chamberlin, 1991). The dotterels move from their nests earlier and stay away from their nests for longer when approached by a person with a dog on a leash than when approached by a person without a dog (Lord et al., 2001). The Department of Conservation notes that coastal birds disturbed by dogs include brown teal, bittern, crakes, banded rail, fairy tern, New Zealand dotterel, little blue penguin and variable oystercatcher (Department of Conservation, 2018). Threatened and at risk species of wetland birds vulnerable to disturbance that have been killed by dogs include bitterns, fernbirds, banded rails, marsh crakes and spotless crakes (O'Donnell et al., 2015).

The adverse effects of dogs on birds are particularly significant for birds that feed and breed on beaches. The habitat that is available for nesting has been dramatically reduced due to coastal urban development and the presence of people and dogs and vehicles on beaches.

The negative environmental impacts of dogs are more severe than those resulting from other human activities on beaches, except for the highly destructive consequences of driving off-road vehicles (Schlacher et al., 2015).

Dogs are the greatest threat to the survival of korora (little blue penguin) populations in New Zealand and are causing the decline of little penguin populations in locations where there is no management of

colonies and no control of predators such as dogs (Blyth, 2006). Some examples of dog attacks on little penguins in New Zealand are listed in Appendix 1.

2. Control of dogs in bird habitats

Territorial authorities have responsibilities under the RMA to protect significant habitats of indigenous fauna. These responsibilities include 'the protection of areas of significant indigenous vegetation and significant habitats of indigenous fauna' section 6 of the RMA. The need to protect these habitats is mentioned in the recently released Draft National Policy on Biodiversity.

Regional councils and territorial authorities should ensure that activities within biodiversity areas are consistent with protection of these areas from adverse effects such as "disruption to indigenous fauna by people, their pets or livestock".

The presence of dogs has adverse effects on birds, so dogs should be prohibited from areas identified as significant habitats of indigenous fauna.

In addition to the need to protect native birds from adverse effects of dogs in biodiversity areas, dog owners and territorial authorities must meet their obligations under the Dog Control Act 1996. One of the obligations of dog owners (section 5 (1) (g)) requires dog owners to "take all reasonable steps to ensure that the dog does not injure, endanger, or cause distress to any stock, poultry, domestic animal, or protected wildlife". Protected wildlife in the Act means "any animal for the time being absolutely protected pursuant to section 3 of the Wildlife Act 1953".

Virtually all native birds are absolutely protected under the Wildlife Act, so dog owners have an obligation under law to ensure that their dog does not injure or endanger native birds.

Dogs that are not on leash are often not under effective control, and dogs should either be prohibited or be on leash in all areas where there are vulnerable native birds.

References

- Banks, P. B., Bryant, J. V., 2007. Four-legged friend or foe? Dog walking displaces native birds from natural areas. *Biol. Lett.* 3, 611-613.
- Biodiversity Collaborative Group, 2018. Draft National Policy Statement for Indigenous Biodiversity. Biodiversity (Land and Freshwater) Stakeholder Trust, Wellington. <https://www.biodiversitynz.org/>.
- Campbell, A., 2016. Penguin dog deaths alarming (24 penguins killed by dogs on Western Bay of Plenty beaches in last year). <https://www.sunlive.co.nz/news/135434-penguindog-deaths-alarming.html>.
- Department of Conservation, 2018. Northland controlled dog areas: rules and regulations. <https://www.doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/know-before-you-go/dog-access/wherican-i-take-my-dog/northland/>.
- Dowding, J. E., Chamberlin, S. P., 1991. Annual movement patterns and breeding-site fidelity of the New Zealand dotterel (*Charadrius obscurus*). *Notornis* 38, 89-102.
- Holderness-Roddam, B., McQuillan, P. B., 2014. Domestic dogs (*Canis familiaris*) as a predator and disturbance agent of wildlife in Tasmania. *Australasian Journal of Environmental Management* 21, 441-452.
- Hughes, J., Macdonald, D. W., 2013. A review of the interactions between free-roaming domestic dogs and wildlife. *Biol. Conserv.* 157, 341-351.
- Lord, A., Waas, J. R., Innes, J., Whittingham, M. J., 2001. Effects of human approaches to nests of northern New Zealand dotterels. *Biol. Conserv.* 98, 233-240.
- O'Donnell, C. F. J., Clapperton, B. K., Monks, J. M., 2015. Impacts of introduced mammalian predators on indigenous birds of freshwater wetlands in New Zealand. *N. Z. J. Ecol.* 39, 19-33.

Schlacher, T. A., Neilsen, T., Weston, M. A., 2013. Human recreation alters behaviour profiles of non-breeding birds on open-coast sandy shores. *Estuar. Coast. Shelf Sci.* 118, 31-42.

Schlacher, T. A., Weston, M. A., Lynn, D., Schoeman, D. S., Huijbers, C. M., Olds, A. D., Masters, S., Connolly, R. M., 2015. Conservation gone to the dogs: when canids rule the beach in small coastal reserves. *Biodivers. Conserv.* 24, 493-509.

Wallace, P. J., 2016. Managing human disturbance of wildlife in coastal areas. *New Zealand Geographer* 72, 133-143.

West Coast Penguin Trust, 2018. May 2018 Newsletter. Blue penguin reports - 2017 Buller monitoring. West Coast Penguin Trust, Hokitika.

Weston, M. A., Stankowich, T., Dogs as agents of disturbance. In: M. E. Gompper, (Ed.), *Free-ranging dogs and wildlife conservation*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014.

Appendix 1. Examples of reports of dog attacks on korora (little blue penguin)

West Coast Penguin Trust (2018). May 2018 Newsletter. Blue penguin reports - 2017 Buller monitoring. West Coast Penguin Trust, Hokitika.

"The Trust has been monitoring the breeding success of blue penguins in the Buller area for 13 years and sadly, most colonies are declining in numbers. Most penguin colonies in the Buller Region are in decline, by far the major land-based threat being roaming dogs and planned land development poses an additional threat to the once thriving Joyce Bay colony."

Stuff. 2 October 2017. More should be done for little blue penguins, says environmentalist. <https://i.stuff.co.nz/environment/97443687/more-should-be-done-for-little-bluepenguins-says-environmentalist>

Stuff. 13 June 2017. Two more dog-related penguin deaths in Wellington frustrate councillor. <https://i.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/news/93640412/two-more-dogrelatedpenguin-deaths-in-wellington-frustrates-councillor>

Radio New Zealand News. 13 June 2017. Penguin deaths prompt dog control warning. <http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/national/332946/penguin-deaths-prompt-dog-controlwarning>

Stuff. 19 January 2017. Little Blue penguins attacked by dogs at Kuaotunu, Coromandel. <http://www.stuff.co.nz/environment/88484344/little-blue-penguins-attacked-by-dogsat-kuaotunu-coromandel>

Auckland Council. 7 April 2016. Change to dog access on Waiheke protects endangered penguins. <http://ourauckland.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/articles/news/2016/04/protectingthe-little-blue-penguin/>

Campbell, A. (2016). Penguin dog deaths alarming (24 penguins killed by dogs on Western Bay of Plenty beaches in last year). <https://www.sunlive.co.nz/news/135434-penguindog-deaths-alarming.html>

Radio New Zealand News. 21 September 2014. Penguin deaths prompt call for action. <http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/national/255127/penguin-deaths-prompt-call-for-action>