

Pest-free *Opoutere*

A one-man mission against pests has brought a community together and helped a MAS Member maintain positive mental health.

The dawn chorus wakes Opoutere resident Chris Woudenberg long before sunrise.

“The kākā start first,” he says. “Around 3am. The dawn chorus here is deafening, but it’s a beautiful sound.”

This wasn’t always the case. When Chris moved to the small Coromandel community about seven years ago, birdsong was a rare thing – not that he noticed at first. “You don’t always notice what’s missing – not until you get it back.”

The engineer and MAS Member soon fell in love with Opoutere and made it his personal mission to rid the area of the rats, stoats and possums that were keeping native birds away and destroying native trees.

“It was very quiet, there was very little birdlife around and slowly and gradually whole trees were being wiped out.”

In particular, the local dotterel population was under threat, with a DOC ranger required to protect them from pests and human interference during the breeding season.



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Chris Woudenberg

Above top / *Chris Woudenberg is passionate about restoring Opoutere’s native ecosystem by removing pests and weeds*

Above / *Endangered native birds like dotterels have benefited from the reduction in pests in Opoutere*

Chris’s personal project began when he stumbled upon some abandoned traps on some tracks nearby and decided to put them to use eradicating pest populations. Quietly, he set to work, mapping the area, self-funding more traps and bait stations and regularly checking the traps.

Chris, who co-founded instrument and calibration business CPS, said he made his project work by fitting pest trapping in between work and family life. He roped in his family and friends to help, and pretty soon the community started getting on board.

Initially, things started with an initiative where locals donated traps. A huge boost came with funding grants from organisations including the Department of Conservation, Thames-Coromandel District Council and Waikato Regional Council, which allowed him to set up more than 300 additional traps and bait stations across a wider area of Opoutere.

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"I mapped the area we were looking after and it was 200 hectares, so not a big space but it backs onto the dotterels' breeding ground. They're what drove the funding success, Opoutere is a space of national environmental significance and one of their main breeding grounds on the Coromandel."

Within about six months, Chris started to hear more birdsong, and since then, the recovery of native bird populations has exploded with piwakawaka, tūi and kererū filling the trees and skies. The kākā numbers have been a noticeable success, going from around 14 at the start of the project to around 80 now, with flocks of up to a dozen flying overhead.

"My property is on their flight path, and it feels like they are saying thank you each time they squawk and fly over.

"One of the things that popped up was a banded rail [moho pererū]. They're very endangered, and they hadn't been spotted for a long time. They're a very cautious ground-based bird living in the marshes, and you don't usually see them in the wild because they get hammered by rats and stoats.

"We saw four pairs and two chicks in one go. We got a photo of them crossing the road. If you've got those, you've got very good predator control."

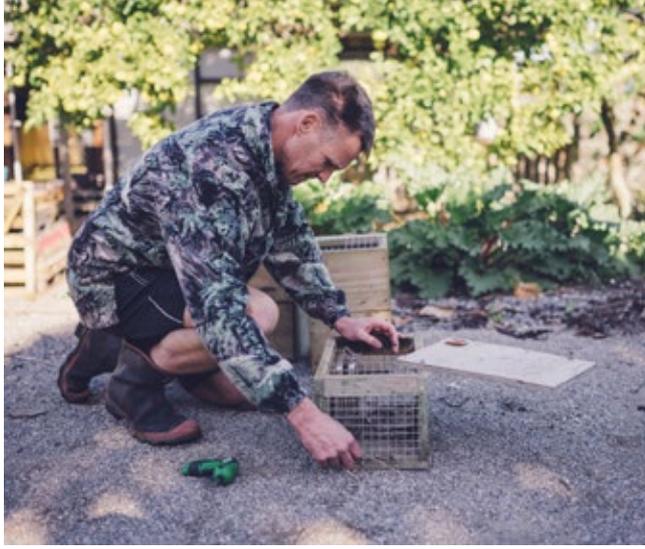
Chris says the key to the project's success is hitting all the pests hard and fast.

"The community has been blown away by my support. I came in and stunned the place basically, and I still get comments when I walk down the road. 'I can't believe what you've done in Opoutere, Chris'."

While the project has boosted the health of the local flora and fauna, Chris also acknowledges that his own mental health has benefited significantly as well.

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01 / Chris Woudenberg and his godson Logan with two of the targeted 100,000 native plants Chris intends to plant in Opoutere

02 / Chris checks a trap 03 / Opoutere's stunning natural beauty is benefiting from a reduction in weeds

Chris has struggled with depression off and on for years and says having a project to focus on – something that got him out in nature doing physical activity – was a huge help in maintaining positive mental health, alongside medication and counselling.

A marriage breakup caused another low, but it was Opoutere that helped him get through.

“My partner sold me her half of the Opoutere place saying the community needed me. Two years later, those words finally made sense to me – but it also would save me. I reached out to my neighbours and built a community here.

“Now I have more positive days than negative days, I started seeing the light at the end of the tunnel and my energy for work has returned.”

But it was making a difference in Opoutere that got him out of bed each day.

His ecology project flourished initially as an underground initiative, but as it got bigger and encountered more red tape, it was in danger of losing momentum. It took another pest – weeds – to give new momentum to Chris and the Opoutere community's eco-movement. Invasive exotic plants including wild ginger and *Elaeagnus* were strangling the peninsula and growing worse by the year. So Chris established working bees where teams of volunteers cleared more than 2.5 hectares of weeds.



Above / The endangered moho pererū or banded rail

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Chris Woudenberg

“It brought the community together on a massive scale. We organised something like 28 working bees across two years with up to 30 people working – everyone from eight-year-old kids to people in their 80s.”

Now Chris has established a native tree nursery on his property and has a goal of planting 100,000 trees by 2040.

“My neighbours say I can't do it. It might be my biggest goal ever.”

He has identified 42 native species that can thrive in the area and is sourcing seedlings from around the region, with neighbours dropping off plants. An automated watering system on his quarter-hectare section allows him to grow between 3,000 and 5,000 plants a year, and he's looking for other places in the area to nurture the natives to bump that number up even higher.

“What's made it a success is that Opoutere is so sheltered and provides the perfect growing environment. The birds love it here when there are no pests. It gets me excited walking on a track seeing pōhutukawa trees in flower when they've never flowered before and the trees we planted getting taller than I am.”

Chris says Opoutere offers hope for every other community in New Zealand where invasive pests and plants have taken over the land.

“This place is unlike anything else the way it bounces back.” ❤️