

Tōtara Reserve Regional Park

Annual Report 2024-25

A. Executive Summary

Tōtara Reserve is Horizons Regional Council's only Regional Park and is located in the Pohangina Valley north of Ashhurst. Its 340 ha includes ecologically rare habitat remnants, large tracts of indigenous forest, a network of walking tracks, a campground and picnic spots; alongside the Pohangina River and with a rich history of use by local iwi.

Management of Tōtara Reserve Regional Park is organised into five work streams: Forest Health, Campground, Mātauranga Māori, Tracks and Trails, and Community Engagement. The activities undertaken this year to maintain and develop Tōtara Reserve are summarised in this report, along with the associated financial reporting. The highlights include:

- The Tōtara Reserve Management Plan ten year review with a new plan finalised in 2025.

Forest Health

- Pest animal population was maintained at low levels with target levels reached for both possums and rats
- Pest plant control of priority species including old mans beard, cathedral bells and banana passionfruit saw a significant milestone reached with phase 1 of the removal strategy completed across the whole reserve.
- Thirteen years of bird monitoring data was analysed to help track trends over time.

Campground

- Camping season went smoothly with higher numbers than previous years
- Upgrades and changes ensured compliance standards were adhered to for the drinking water and wastewater treatment systems

Matauranga Maori

- Māori history and perspectives were prepared
- The two new walkway entrance structures were blessed

Tracks and Trails

- Track upgrades were carried out
- Two whare structure were constructed to frame the entrances of two main walking tracks
- The Nature Trail circuit was marked

Community Engagement

- Tōtara Reserve Open Day was held with good attendance
- TRIBE volunteer days were established and held every second Tuesday of each month

B. Budget vs Actual 2024-25

Revenue

- Camping income was higher than expected.
- The central government Flood Resilience fund repaid the expenditure incurred during 2023-24 flood resilience investigation.
- A flood repair invoice from 2023 was corrected resulting in a credit of \$15,653 in this year's actuals.

Expenditure

- The management plan review cost more to advertise and publish than originally budgeted due to higher advertising costs than anticipated and the decision to have professional formatting of final plan. Management Plan review costs totalled \$22,464 (includes \$5k from previous financial year) plus staff time.
- Staff time has been considerably higher than budgeted due largely to Management Plan review (206 staff hours) and insufficient other staff time budgeted for general operations (175 hours extra charged).
- Depreciation and vehicle recharges were higher than annual plan had allowed for Horizons depreciation accounting schedules were adjusted this year which resulted in this increase to the annual plan budgets.
- In general, overspends in some areas were compensated for with additional unbudgeted income (credited flood repair invoice, higher camping income) and underspending in other less critical areas like community engagement.

Capital Expenditure

- Flood Resilience project funding was put on hold due to the high cost of engineered stopbank and emergency escape route construction solutions. Council wanted the Management Plan review to be carried out before any large projects could be considered for funding.
- The Septic system control panel that had been flagged in the asset register for replacement was deemed to be still performing well. Capex was held back for future years.
- The Granular Activated Carbon system for filtering of cyanobacteria was installed and costs came in on budget
- The two track entrance whares were designed, consented and constructed within budget. These cost \$32,302 each including design and consenting costs, a small portion of which was paid for in the previous financial year.
- A number of track rafts were constructed to traverse the muddy sections on the Pettifar Track.
- Link track and visitor area development was begun but carried out by staff labour

C. Tōtara Reserve Management Plan

In May 2025 the Tōtara Reserve Management Plan 2025 was finalised and adopted by Council. Completing the Management Plan review was a priority outcome for this financial year. The Tōtara Reserve Management Plan 2025 represents a significant milestone and is the result of an essential planning and community engagement process that shapes the ongoing and future management of the Reserve. The next review is set to occur in 2035.

- This can be viewed online here: [Tōtara-Reserve-Management-2025.pdf](#)

The process to complete the Plan took 18 months. The steps are itemised in the following Table.

Milestone	Date
Council presented with draft TRMP for approval to go to public consultation	26 November 2024
Public consultation on draft TRMP (2 months)	5 December 2024 to 7 February 2025
Analysis of submissions	February 2025
Submission hearings	End February 2025
Draft TRMP amended in accordance with submissions, document formatting	March 2025
Council presented with final TRMP	29 April 2025
Final TRMP published and made publicly available	May 2025

D. Forest Health

Pest Animal Management – Possums and Rats

Bait Stations

There is a network of 651 bait stations throughout Tōtara Reserve to control rat and possum numbers. Baiting was last carried out in August 2024 using Pestoff (Brodifacoum).

Possum Monitoring

The operational target for possum control within Tōtara Reserve is 2% Residual Trap Catch Index (RTCI) which is considered to support minimal canopy browse and impact from possums during birding season. The monitor conducted in 2023 returned a result of 2% RTCI and in February 2025 returned a result of 1.8% RTCI which was below the operational target.

RTCI monitoring for possums is done annually.

Rodent Monitoring

There are five lines x 10 footprint tracking tunnels in the reserve. These are used to track rodent densities four times a year.

While rat at tracking tunnel monitoring results in May 2024 were over 20% subsequent monitors in both November 2024 and February 2025 were a pleasing 0% Tracking Tunnel Index (TTI) showing the effectiveness of winter baiting. While TTI had increased to 6% at the latest monitor done in May 2025 this was still below the general target of 10% TTI. Over spring the target is 5% to support bird breeding and the winter baiting in August 2025 is expected to help achieve this lower abundance.

Figure 2 shows possum and rat monitoring results pre and post poison baiting operations – and the types of toxins used.

Trapping

Eighty four DOC200, forty one DOC250 and twenty five Flipping Timmy traps are currently checked monthly. Figure 1 shows total numbers of animals trapped each month over recent years

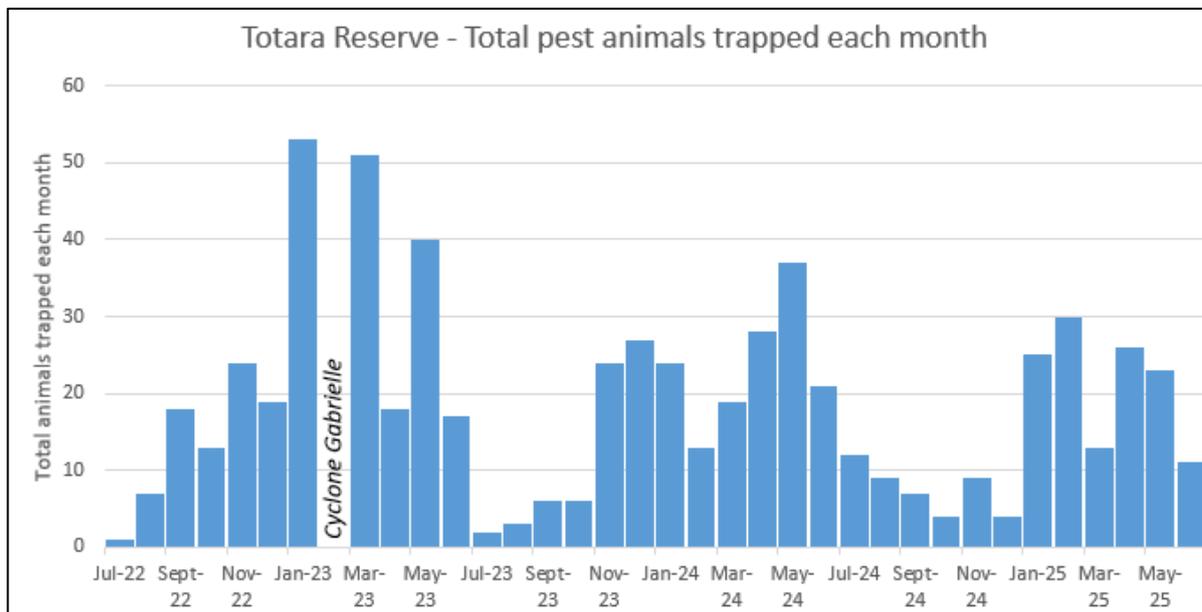


Figure 1: Total pest animals caught in traps per month to August 2025

Totara Reserve Possum & Rodent baiting operations & result monitoring for pest abundance

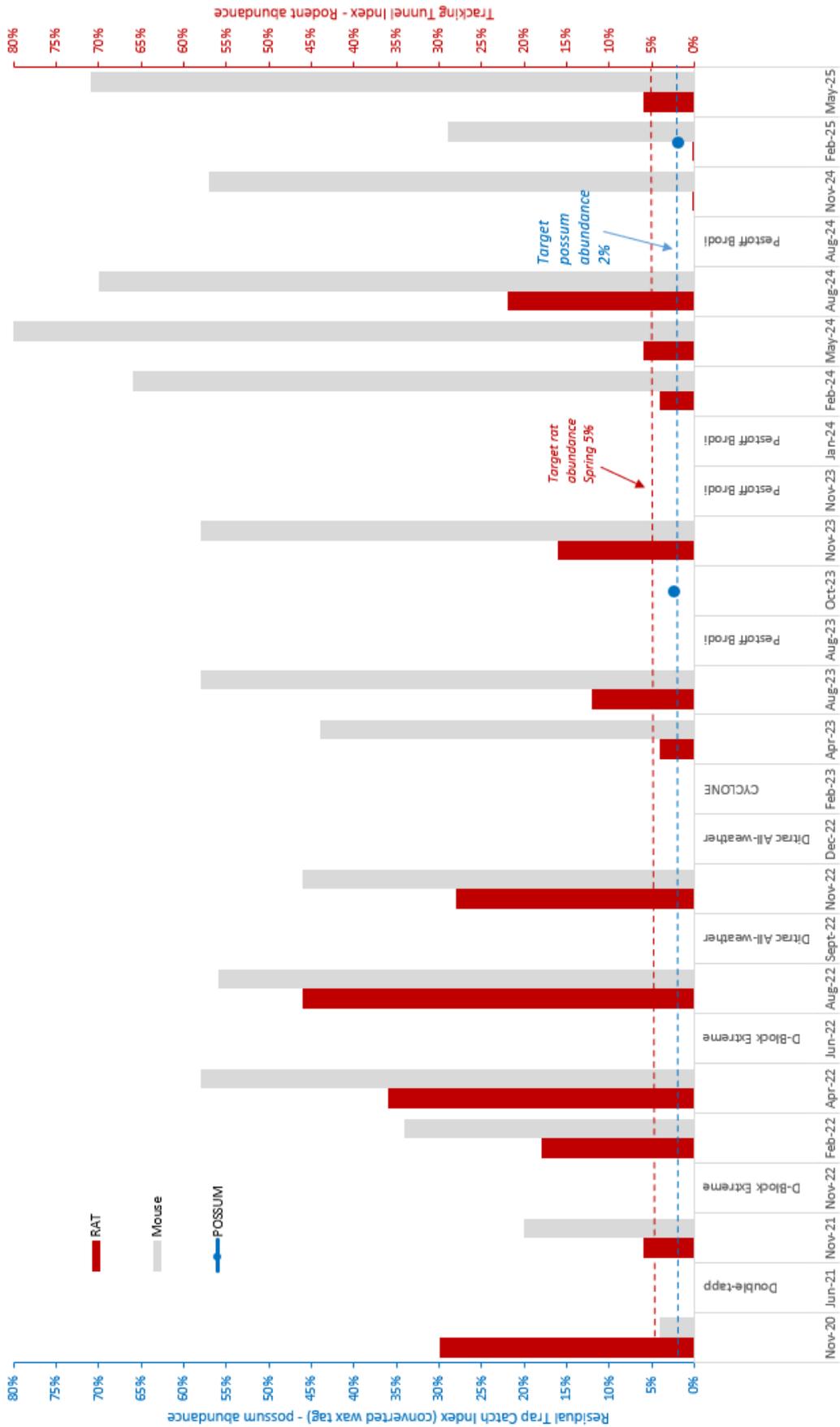


Figure 2: Tōtara Reserve poison baiting operations vs animal pest monitoring results over five years

Pest Animal Management – Deer

To meaningfully decrease the deer population, 40-50% removal is generally recommended as 33% removal still allows the deer population to maintain itself through breeding. To achieve a 40-50% reduction in the likely population at Tōtara Reserve it is currently estimated that 5 to 15 deer would need to be culled per year.

At Tōtara Reserve eradication or exclusion of deer is not an option but consistent pressure on the deer through regular culling is likely to be most beneficial.



Areas near campground, river and high use tracks would need to be controlled outside of camping season. Parts of forest on the eastern side of the road could potentially be controlled throughout the year. This was not started in 2024-25.

Monitoring of deer palatable seedlings will begin in 2025 and deer management could be adapted accordingly over time, in response to the monitoring outcomes.

Pest Animal Management – Wasps

The wasp bait station network was upgraded this year with a total of 247 wasptek bait stations installed/replaced in Tōtara Reserve around the campgrounds, Fern Walk and Pettifar Tracks (Figure 3) Four observations took place 3rd and 24th February, 14th March and 1st April. No wasps or low numbers of wasps were observed the first three monitors. However the last wasp activity monitor was very close to the trigger number, so the bait stations were filled around both campgrounds and Camp Rangi Woods with Vespex. This baiting was repeated on the 2nd and 11th of April.

A large willow was removed at Kererū campground to remove this significant host to large populations of wasps

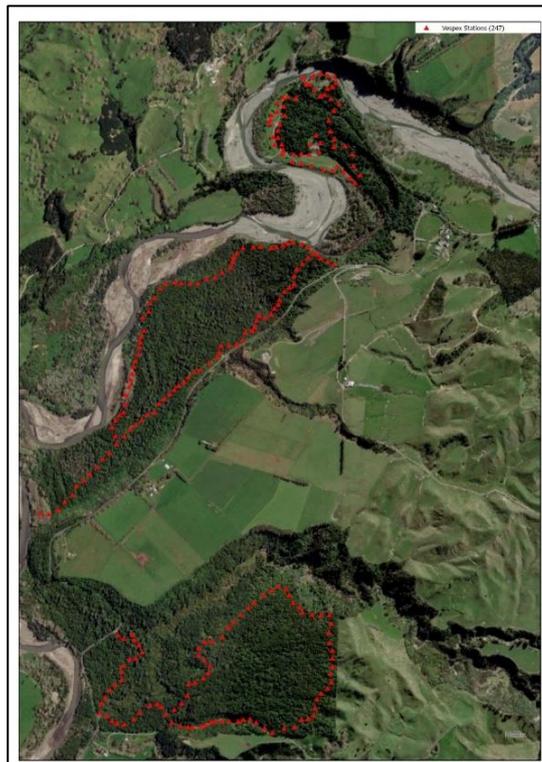


Figure 3: The increased wasp bait station network

Pest Plant Management

A tender process for the renewal of the pest plant management contract started in April 2025 and received 3 applicants. It was important the selection of contractor could manage the large scale, the care needed to support the significant indigenous biodiversity, understand the difficult terrain; plus provide comprehensive reporting that clearly illustrates the work carried out and progress made.

The incumbent contractor Kaitiaki o Ngahere have been appointed. They have developed a comprehensive work approach and a Restoration Framework that analyses and clearly illustrates the work completed and progress made.

A significant milestone was met this year with phase 1 'Initial Control' for priority species old mans beard, banana passionfruit and cathedral bells completed for all Management Units in Tōtara Reserve. This is illustrated in map form in Figure 4.

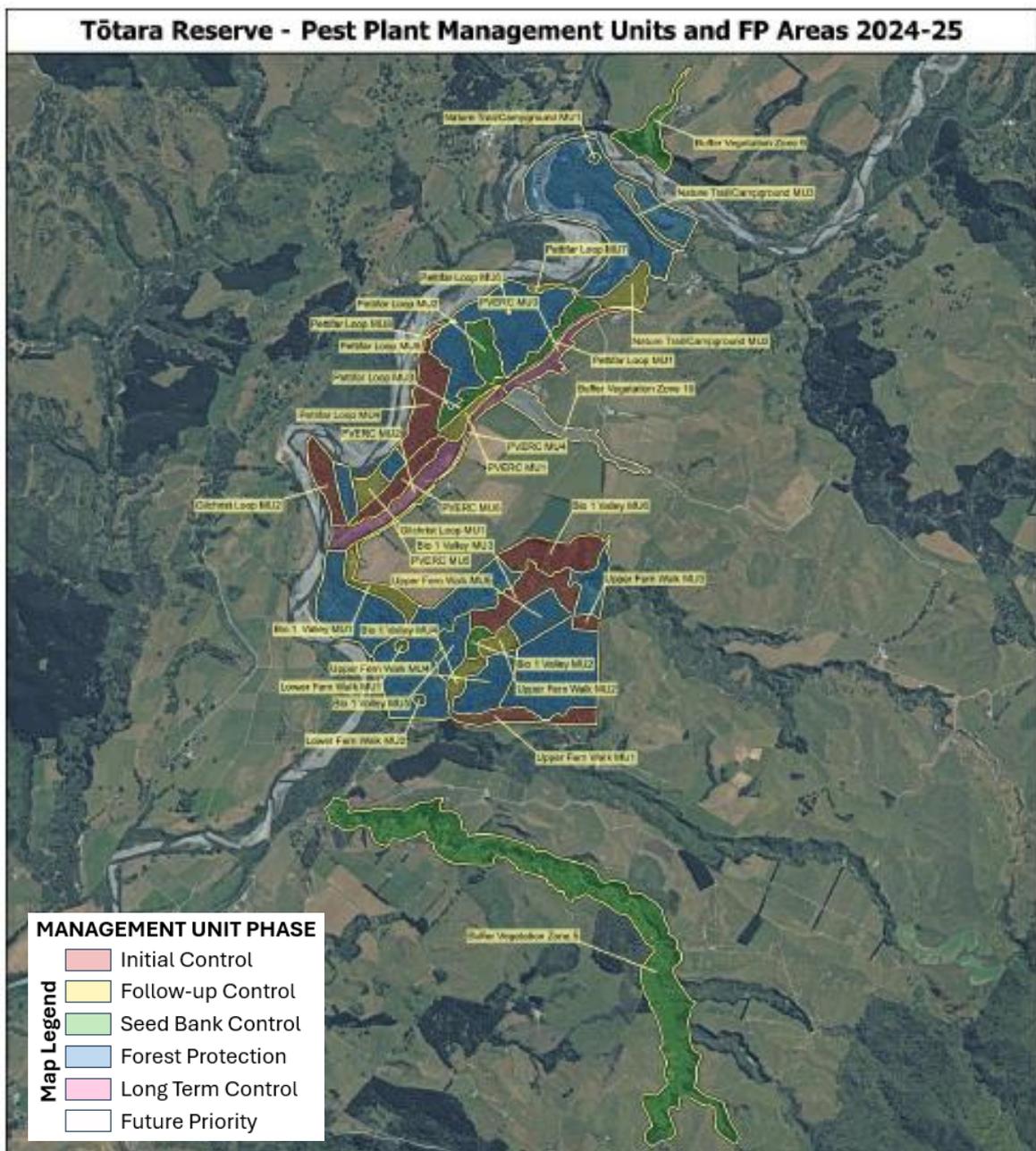


Figure 4: Mapped pest plant control units for Tōtara Reserve showing progressive management categories

Biodiversity Monitoring

Birds

Bird monitoring using 5-minute bird counts continued, with the annual survey undertaken in September 2024.

An analysis of the data from multiple years of surveys was carried out in 2024-25 to assess trends in bird densities in response to predator control (see the following graphs – rat abundance is the grey dotted line).

While the 5-minute bird count surveys have been undertaken annually since 2012, the data can be affected by inconsistencies in listeners, weather and survey location. Variations in these at Tōtara Reserve, particularly between the results before and those after 2021, means suggested trends over time must be considered with caution. This is illustrated in the summary graph of all species monitored – both exotic and native (Figure 5), where the monitoring team and survey locations changed. This technique is still valuable for helping identify any significant increase or decrease in certain species.

A budget has been set aside for ongoing annual monitoring to try and ensure greater consistency across years.

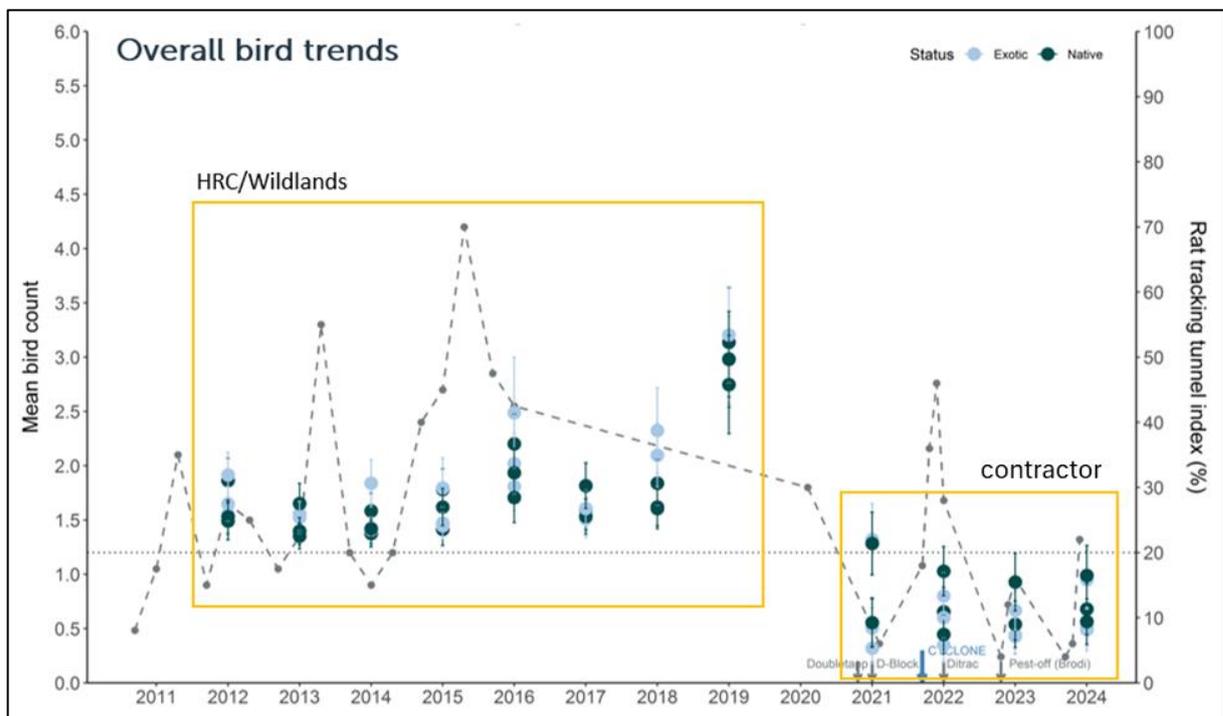


Figure 5: Overall bird trends measured during 5-minute-bird counts over 13 years at Tōtara Reserve

Long term aspirations for bird translocations

A site assessment of Tōtara Reserve was conducted by conservation specialist for potential reintroductions of various species.

In summary, Tōtara Reserve has considered very high-quality habitat and could be a good site for reintroduction of some species including

- Titipounamu (rifleman) - *if currently absent*
- Toutouwai (North Island Robin)
- Kakariki (yellow crowned parakeet)

Increased predator control that focussed on rodents could also be especially beneficial to invertebrate and reptile species present.

Powelliphanta snails

Multiple night surveys for *Powelliphanta* snails were conducted with Massey University experts. The Tōtara Reserve population appears to be benefiting from possum and rat control but is confined to a relatively small area.



Figure 6: *Powelliphanta* snail shell showing evidence of predation

Planting

Planting has been carried out with the community on the riverside next to Kererū Campground. This contributes to the forest buffer programme to change weed species to a dense native planted area that becomes a buffer to protect the forest from further weed incursion. This is a relatively small programme to ensure maintenance can continue to support tree growth. This year 500 manuka plants were donated and planted at the Tōtara Reserve Open day.



E. Campground

Campground Maintenance Contract

The maintenance contract work was carried out by Fulton Hogan according to the contract scope and audited monthly with no outstanding concerns.

Camping season

The camping season progressed very well with long fine spells and no interruptions from significant environmental events or MDC's new bridge build to replace the Churchill Road Bridge. This work has significantly progressed with the first of 2 spans across the river installed up to August 2025. Camping income has been above budget as a result.

- Camping numbers (Figure 7) were obtained from the booking system to the end of the season in April 2025:
- Numbers have varied 300 to 600 guests per site type, powered and unpowered, over the past 4 seasons.
- Most guests stayed in 2021-22 season with 7,192 compared to this season with 6,437.
- The peak occupancy continues to occur in January, followed by December (Figure 7).

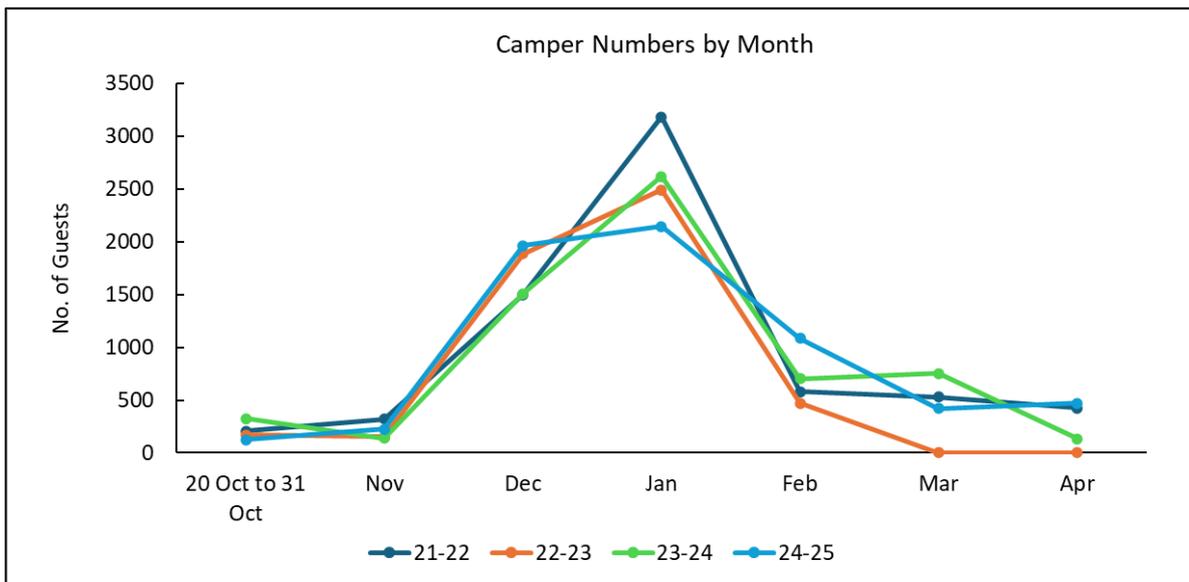


Figure 7 – Daily camping numbers at Tōtara Reserve

Swim-safety / general safety

On October 12th, following guidance from Drowning Prevention Auckland, swim safety throw bags were installed, along with nationally standard swim safety signage in each campground. One of the throw bags has gone missing on two separate occasions from the river entrance at Kererū Campground. Replacement throw bags have been purchased and will be installed prior to the new camping season, as well as additional messaging emphasising the importance of the throw bags.

Camper safety remains high with no events of concern to report.

Drinking Water Supply

Cyanobacteria toxin control – Granular Activated Carbon filtration system

The new Granular Activated Carbon filtration system was installed in 2024-25 and commissioned on January 17th. It operated successfully through 2025.

Routine testing and compliance

The water treatment plant performed as expected, in line with our Water Safety Plan.

The routine testing of the water was carried out according to schedule across the year with no significant exceedances detected.

In June and July, the plan was reviewed and updated to reflect the latest requirements from Taumata Arowai all changes recommended were implemented during 2024-25.

The system upgrades improved system monitoring, offering potential time savings by reducing the need for onsite visits.

The testing schedule for the 2025-26 year was confirmed, with weekly testing to begin when the campground opens in October 2025 and continue through to the end of April 2026.

Wastewater Treatment

Routine quarterly checks of the wastewater treatment plant were carried out by S3 Ltd. In addition to routine maintenance this year: The Magmeter was replaced; and A report was prepared to review compliance with consent conditions.

The review highlighted 2 gaps in compliance that were rectified and are now adhered to. This included:

- Installing a telemeter to relay daily flows to Hilltop data centre at Horizons; and
- Initiating a log book of the telemeter data to track water usage volume against visitor numbers. Figure 8 shows the data prepared for this year.

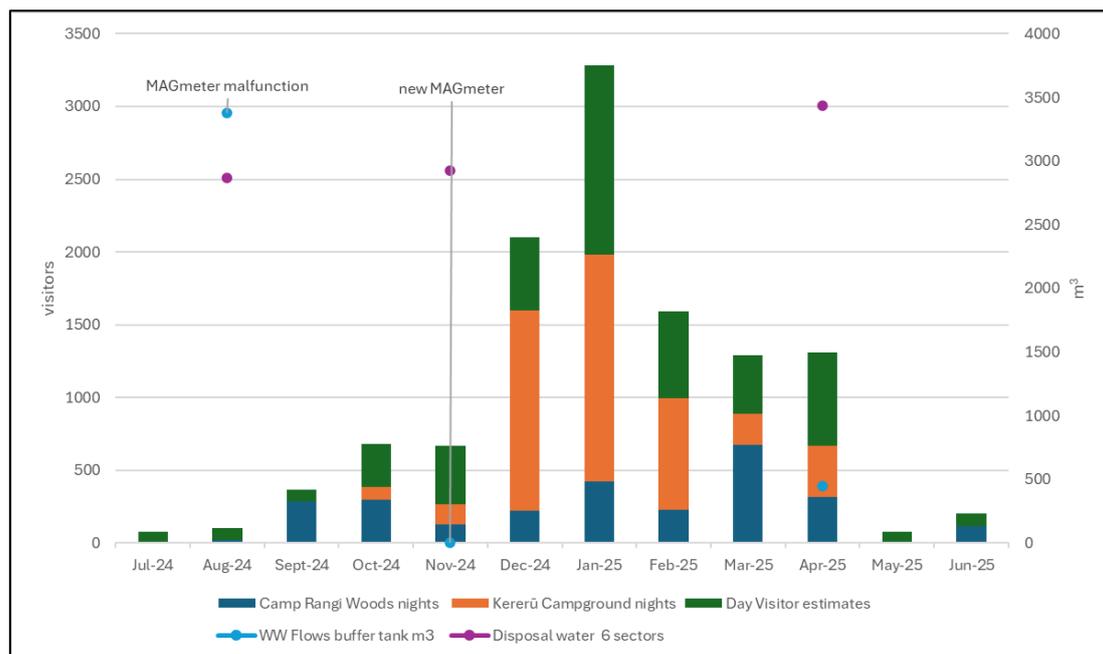


Figure 8 – Total guest bookings including Kererū campground, Camp Rangī Woods, estimated daily guests compared to wastewater volumes (limited data)

F. Mātauranga Maori

Collating knowledge and values

Two reports were researched and written in 2024 that helped inform the Tōtara Reserve Management Plan 2025 and activities for the future. These reports are not for public distribution due to the disclosed locations of some wahi tapu, but their general content will be used to inform other documents, protocol and content intended for public audience.

- *Thematic Analysis of Appropriate Tikanga for HRC work at and Management of Tōtara Reserve* (Venessa Pokaia). This work built on an initial project by Stem Academy intern Tikardan Tahiwī-Stowers who explored the question 'how can HRC incorporate mātauranga maori into the operations and management of Tōtara Reserve as a means of transmitting knowledge, particularly regarding rongoa rakau?' by interviewing further mana whenua for their views.
- *Māori History Report for Tōtara Reserve* (Peter Te Rangi)

Hui

Tuesday 11th February 2025 a hui was held including a visit to Tōtara Reserve. This allowed for korero about the Tōtara Reserve Management Plan and ideas to further opportunities.

Blessing of the new Whare

Monday 28th July 2025 Matua Manahi Paewai provided the blessing of the new walkway entrances at the Fern Walk and the Pettifar Track. (Figure 9).

The blessing was followed by a discussion on sign content. This emphasised the importance of the Māori story first from which other elements such as environment and geography could be developed.



Figure 9: Fern Walk and Pettifar Track entrance blessings – July 2025

G. Tracks and Trails

Track Maintenance

The tracks have been professionally cleared three times this year due to windfalls blocking the track or posing a risk to public safety.

Additional ongoing maintenance work has been carried out on the track rafts and signage by the biodiversity team, with help from TRIBE volunteers.

New track rafts were built and installed by Smith & Sons Ltd in June 2025. These remove all wet areas on the Pettifar Track (Figure 10).

Entranceways were built at the start of the Fern Walk and the Pettifar Track in June 2025 by Smith & Sons Ltd. The design for the whares was the same design as the 8 Whare built for Tū Te Manawa project along the Manawatū River, but smaller. The next stage is to develop content for signage as introduced in Section D. Mātauranga Māori (Figure 11).



Figure 10: Track rafts installed on Pettifar Track – June 2025



Figure 11: Fern Walk and Pettifar Track entranceways built - June 2025

Track Marking – Nature Trail

The Nature Trail has been marked to follow a circuit. Markers were installed in June 2025 (Figure 12). This is, in part, to limit walkers to one track rather than a variety of different side paths and to create an clearly directed circuit. Signs were also installed at the side tracks entering Camp Rangi Woods to limit people entering Camp Rangi who are not guests there.



Figure 12: Nature Trail circuit markers - June 2025

H. Community Engagement

Tōtara Reserve Open Day

Tōtara Reserve hosted its second annual open day event on Saturday 12th October 2024. The event was attended by approximately 350 people, 90 of whom arrived on the Horizons organised bus service.

The event featured a variety of activities, such as guided walks, insect identification, and native tree planting, along with numerous stalls staffed by Horizons personnel and community groups. Participating community groups included Ruahine Kiwi, Ruahine Whio Protectors, Pohangina Catchment Care Group, and Awahou School.

The day resulted in an additional 133 followers on Facebook.



Figure 13: Community engagement at Tōtara Reserve Open Day - October 2024

Friends of Tōtara Reserve – TRIBE (Tōtara Reserve Indigenous Biodiversity Enhancements)

The analysis from the first round of public consultation for the Tōtara Reserve Management Plan highlighted a desire from the public for volunteer opportunities at Tōtara Reserve

To meet this interest the biodiversity team has created a volunteer activity schedule giving volunteers the opportunity to help on the first Tuesday of each month.

Throughout the year volunteers worked alongside the biodiversity team to carry out a range of key forest health activities throughout the reserve, including native tree planting, pest plant control and track maintenance by covering track rafts with netting (Figure 14).



Figure 14: TRIBE volunteers helping Horizons staff with planting and anti-slip track netting