

## Searching for penguins on Somes Island

After the amazing talk by Dr John Cockrem about Antarctica and New Zealand penguins, attended by 75 people, we decided to undertake a fieldtrip to look for penguins on Matiu/Somes Island in Wellington Harbour. The Island provides critical habitat for little penguin/kororā, the world's smallest penguin.

The weather forecast scared off at least half the group, but the other half of us was brave enough to take on the challenge. Leaving from Palmy under pouring rain, after 2 hours we arrived at almost sunny Wellington. Our Guide, Mike, his wife, Gail, and Alastair with Mena, a DOC-certified penguin detecting dog, were waiting for us at the Days Bay wharf. It took us only 10 minutes to arrive at the Island.

The Island has a very unusual European history and is a significant site for Maori, but this is a story for another trip. We were interested in penguins, this time. Mike took us to one of the buildings on the island and did a very informative presentation about the penguin conservation project, in which he has been involved for many years. One of the main goals of the study was to find out how various tagging technics affect the bird's survival.

Then Mike took us off-track to show how they check penguins' nest boxes during the breeding season. Each of us had to check and report back to Mike the presence of feathers in the nest boxes; although we didn't see any penguins in the nest boxes we found geckos and skink inside along with beetles and even a stick insect. Many nest boxes were full with feathers, suggesting birds use these artificial nests, and even prefer them over natural burrows.

Mena, a penguin detecting dog and her owner Alastair showed us how they work in tandem looking for penguins' natural nests. When Mena sniffs a sense of penguin she indicates it by sitting and looking at Alastair or pointing. Then it is Alastair's job to discover the nest and note its location and state.

Although we did not see penguins this time we were not disappointed as we learned a lot about their habitat and conservation. Everybody enjoyed the company of Mike, Gail and Alastair, whose amazing stories and valuable experience were a perfect addition to the practical side of the trip. The best time to see penguins is at dusk and during the breeding season, so I promised we will be back with an overnight trip in Sep-Nov.

See you on our next trip in April!



Introduction to the Island's history by our guides, Gale and Mike



Walking in the bush surrounded by kakariki



Gecko found in one of the penguin nest boxes, most likely *Woodworthia maculatus*



A stick insect found in the vegetation, unidentified



Alastair and Mena looking for penguins' natural nests