

**Waikanae Estuary Newsletter
No 48 February 2011**

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Royal Spoonbill in Distress



Looking out of my lounge window I saw something on the edge of the river where the royal spoonbills like to loaf. It looked like a piece of white plastic, even after looking through my telescope, so I thought no more about it. Later, in the morning having a cuppa tea with our friend Eileen, Moira, my wife remarked that there was a white bird flapping about. It wasn't a piece of plastic at all. It was a royal spoonbill in distress. Eileen and I went down and I threw a sheet over the bird realising it was in a bad way. I decided to take it to the Nga Manu wildlife reserve. Eileen wanted to know how we were going to get it there as we didn't have a box to put it in. "Don't worry you are going to nurse it" I said as I put a towel over her lap and passed her the bird wrapped in a sheet. Bruce at Nga Manu met us at the door and we passed the bird to him. "Feel the ribcage Mik" he said and there was absolutely no meat there. Extending



from both sides of its head were about thirty bloodsucking ticks with their bodies extended with blood sucked from the bird. I left the bird with Bruce and with the help of Rhys their wild life expert, they, with tweezers removed the ticks and some lice which were also affecting the bird. Moira and I went down to the river and got a bucket of saline water from the backwater then back home and retrieved some whitebait given us by Wendy the whitebaiter early in the season. Bruce had had previous experience with a spoonbill and as they feed by moving their bill sideways in the water, had hopes of putting the saline water in a flat bowl and sprinkling the whitebait in there for the bird to feed on. This didn't happen as the bird was too weak so he delivered it to Andrea at the Raumatangi Veterinary clinic. Andrea has a long list of successful wildlife "saves" having treated a sick kiwi, been

Ticks taken off the spoonbill 'midwife' to a tuatara, splinted a baby kaka's foot, removed a fishhook from a swan's neck [see newsletter August 2010] and helicoptered to Mana and Maud islands to assist with the transfer of young takahe to their natural environment in Fiordland. So if anyone could save our spoonbill she could.

The bird survived three nights after being given substance through a drip. It picked up and was fed whitebait [So Wendy they went to a good cause] and fish every couple of hours. It couldn't use its legs and would sit with them spread out in front. Andrea made a sling and hooked it up so its body was held and its legs were touching the floor and were massaged, but to no avail as they appeared paralysed. Not wanting to make the wrong judgement, Andrea consulted with another veterinary surgeon who unfortunately came to the same conclusion and the little spoonbill was put to sleep.



Photograph Robert Gibbs

Ticks

Article supplied by Dr Allen Heath

Senior Scientist in Parasitology at Ag Research, National Centre for Biosecurity and Infectious Disease

The ticks that were taken off the spoonbill were a species *Ixodes eudyptidis* we share with Australia and found nowhere else in the world. There is no common name, but blue penguin tick would probably be OK because this tick commonly infests the penguins, although to date around 20 species of birds in NZ waters have also been found infested with the tick and the spoonbill adds a new host record. In fact I was unable to find any records of ticks of any sort from spoonbills. Ticks feed on blood, and in this species the female feeds for at least 7 days, then drops off when she is full of blood and swollen up (like the large ticks in the photo). She lays around 2000 eggs on the ground, usually somewhere damp such as under vegetation or a rock. The eggs hatch some weeks later, incubation being faster in warm weather and slower in the cold. Larvae with 6 legs hatch out and look for a bird host. They feed, swell up and fall to the ground and eventually lose their outer skin (cuticle) as they moult. The next stage is an 8-legged nymph which feeds in its turn, drops off, moults somewhere in the environment and becomes either a male or female tick, and the cycle begins again. It takes a year or more for the whole life cycle to be complete. This tick, like around 70 other species worldwide, is able to paralyse its host. I first encountered this phenomenon associated with *I. eudyptidis* in the Kaikoura red-billed gull colony in the 1970s. The birds showed the first signs of paralysis by being unable to stand, then they couldn't fly and finally eating and breathing became impossible and they eventually succumbed. The number of ticks they carried was roughly correlated with the extent of paralysis; the more ticks, the more severe the paralysis. Removal of ticks relieved the symptoms in some birds if they were not too far gone. The spoonbill probably picked up its 74 ticks (64 females, 9 nymphs and one larva) on Kapiti as a few pairs nest near the black-backed gulls at the northern end of the island, and I have found black-backs with the tick on Somes Island. When the chicks have fledged later this year I am hoping to visit Kapiti and just see how high the tick numbers are and to confirm my guess as to the source of this dangerous parasite.---

The saga of Thomas, Henry and Henrietta will continue next month

Hits last Month--Thirteen Thousand Five Hundred & Twenty Five

Mik Peryer the Birdman of Waikanae

More wild birds visit Waikanae Estuary Scientific Reserve than any other area in the Wellington province

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