

Safe harbour needed for birds

In the second of our articles on people who made submissions to the Franklin Local Board's Draft Plan, a Pukekohe conservationist highlights the importance of the Manukau Harbour and the need to protect it

By SAMANTHA McPHERSON

If access to four roost sites along the shellbanks of the southern coast of the Manukau Harbour isn't restricted then it could affect thousands of migratory shorebirds.

That's the opinion of leading conservationist, Pukekohe's David Lawrie, and he is concerned about the birds' future in our area.

In a submission made to the Franklin Local Board last month, Mr Lawrie highlighted the importance of these roost sites and outlined to the board the major responsibility it has in retaining them.

"They need to advocate for nature in its broadest sense to ensure that developments don't occur that could lead to increased pressures on these important bird roost areas. There are 2½ times more birds in the Manukau Harbour compared to the number of birds on the Seabird Coast, which is why it's such an important site."

These roost sites regularly contain between 2000 and 10,000 birds which include bar tailed godwits, red knots and pied oystercatchers. They



SIGNIFICANT SITES: Pukekohe's David Lawrie believes it's important to keep access restricted to shellbanks along the southern shores of the Manukau Harbour to sustain birdlife.

travel to New Zealand from their arctic breeding grounds each September until March of the following year.

And as Auckland grows Mr Lawrie said these roost sites would be threatened.

"Auckland Council can keep restricting access but in the long term there needs to be something set up like a zone around the roost sites to stop kite surfers who sit on the bank and use the high tide to kite surf as it's shallow water around the mud flats.

"It means that the birds can't use that bank when the high tide comes in and kites themselves are perceived as a threat because they look like predators," he said.

These birds feed on the open mudflat areas during low tide periods where they obtain the food to enable them to undertake their feather moult and accumulate the necessary fat reserves to sustain their direct flight from New Zealand to China, which is the first stop on their flight north to their

breeding grounds. Mr Lawrie said to sustain the birdlife and their food resources it was necessary to have a healthy harbour and retain the intertidal areas.

"It's important that we give them the food and the fuel they need to sustain these long journeys. That's why it's important and essential to preserve the value of these sites by restricting access. The board needs to be very careful about where they open up that access," he said.

The Manukau Harbour is one of the most important sites in New Zealand for migratory shorebirds.

"It's vital to control or restrict public access and further development on the shoreline. If these roost sites are disturbed the birds will take to the air or travel across the harbour which creates conflicts with the Auckland International Airport and leads to public safety issues," he said.

Each roost site is a wetland

of international significance as they hold up to 6 per cent of the world's bird population and in March it could be up to 15 per cent.

During the 2009 summer period 26,173 birds were counted in the Manukau Harbour and numbers are similar in winter.

The Ornithological Society has undertaken biannual counts of the birds using the harbour since 1965 and these results show the effects of changes within the harbour.

According to Mr Lawrie, it would appear that the populations are more affected by activities that are taking place in China but he said that was no reason for us to place them under increased stress by developments here.

Mr Lawrie founded the National Wetland Trust of New Zealand and has been heavily involved in organisations such as the New Zealand Fish and Game Council, Miranda Naturalist Trust and The Ornithological Society.