



Judges' Report

CATEGORY:

Landscape and Habitat

Marlborough Forest & Bird, Taylor River Restoration Project

INTERVIEWED

Helen Braithwaite, Rob McCaw and Alex Phelps

DATE

6 December 2024

JUDGES

Roy Grose, Helen Ballinger and Wendy Sullivan

INTRODUCTION

The Marlborough branch of Forest and Bird aims to restore native forest pockets in central Blenheim to support "greening Marlborough". Volunteers sought a new planting project after completing their efforts at Marshall Place.

Forest and Bird adopted a 2000m² site along the Taylor River Reserve near New Renwick Road to create another native area or "stepping stone." The organisation has implemented a three-year, staged approach to planting and maintenance, utilising volunteers and local students.



GENERAL INFORMATION

Its proximity to many schools makes the Taylor River Reserve a useful field classroom for learning and nature connection. EnviroSchools use the site for their Freshwater Education Programme, and the student-led Writers Walk showcases the environmental value of urban waterways through poetry plaques.

Historically, central Blenheim was covered in kahikatea-pukatea-tawa forest, now classified as having less than 10% of its original coverage under the Threatened Environments Classification. Currently, the Taylor River Reserve consists mainly of mown grass, with some native riparian plantings established through the Council's Tui to Town project. The reserve also includes exotic shade trees and the Ralph Ballinger Arboretum.

After discussions with the Council, Forest and Bird selected the Taylor River site for their next restoration project due to its accessibility, visibility, and its supplements nearby [Tui to Town](#) plantings.

The first planting in winter 2023 was in conjunction with EnviroSchools, which received funding from the One Billion Trees Project for 150 trees. Forest and Bird volunteers subsequently received a grant from Yealands and established a second planting of 500 trees in 2024. They have hosted volunteer working bees for plant maintenance and weeding.

The project has been well supported by Marlborough Boys' and Girls' Colleges, Leo's Club, local businesses and residents. DOC and Weed Solutions Ltd have pledged future support in controlling poplar regeneration.

Alex Phelps, a member of the MGC Envirogroup and Forest and Bird committee, said "It is great to have the students involved in such a collaborative project".

The next steps in 2025 will consist of further planting to expand the area and poplar regrowth control and continued plant maintenance.

THE JUDGES WERE IMPRESSED BY

- The project's phased, three-year plan allowed manageable workloads and efficient use of limited funding.
- Forest and Bird demonstrated expertise in restoration through strategic plant selection, focusing on drought-tolerant pioneer species and diversity.
- Impressive plant growth and survivorship highlighted the care taken in harsh conditions.
- Collaboration with youth groups provided educational and leadership opportunities.
- The project serves as an ecological stepping stone within the Taylor River corridor, showcasing the benefits of urban ecological restoration and landscape connectivity.
- Forest and Bird were very H&S conscientious, proactively identifying and managing work hazards, particularly around volunteer fatigue and dehydration.



PROBLEMS AND HOW THEY HAVE BEEN TACKLED

- Hard, stony ground made planting difficult. Older students from Marlborough Boys' and Girls' Colleges, Leo's Club, and adult volunteers were enlisted instead of younger primary-aged children. Tools such as augers and post-hole diggers helped with digging holes, though these methods may not be sustainable due to the strain on volunteers and equipment.
- Summer drought conditions threatened plant survival. Forest and Bird successfully negotiated with a nearby business to secure a water supply, ensuring the plants could be watered.
- Organising working bees for plant maintenance and weeding proved time-consuming, with weeding being particularly unpopular. Forest and Bird is addressing this by recruiting a local resident as a dedicated volunteer coordinator to oversee weekly weeding and watering sessions.
- The Taylor Reserve's dual role in recreation and flood protection limits restoration opportunities due to Council-maintained stop banks. Forest and Bird is in discussions with the Council to identify suitable areas for future planting.
- Rabbit damage has been effectively minimized through the use of tree guards and the Council's ongoing rabbit control program.

SUMMARY

The Marlborough branch of Forest and Bird's focus on urban restoration has enhanced Blenheim's connection to nature while serving as a valuable educational tool. The project demonstrates sound ecological practices, effective community collaboration, engaging diverse groups and fostering conservation leadership and participation among young adults.

SUGGESTIONS

- Incorporate opportunities for more engagement with the site, such as a learning space or trail with tree signs, weta houses, and seating. See Grovetown Lagoon for an example of low-cost tree signs.
- Include students outside environment committees to broaden engagement and learning opportunities.
- Use water crystals and fertiliser tablets during planting to enhance survival rates.
- Explore contour ripping or small digger assistance to improve planting efficiency, potentially through commercial sponsorship.

