



Awarua Wetlands

Southland



Waituna Wetland, part of the Awarua Wetlands, was one of the first in New Zealand to be officially recognised as a wetland of international importance. The 3500-hectare wetland, known as the Waituna Wetland Scientific Reserve, was listed as part of New Zealand's obligations when signing the Ramsar Wetland Convention. This international convention promotes wise or sustainable use of wetlands and recognises wetlands of international importance.

The Waituna Wetland is only part of a much larger wetland complex located on the Awarua Plain. This wetland complex includes three major estuaries: Toetoes, Awarua Bay and the New River. These three estuaries are a characteristic feature of the Southland coast and are still relatively unspoiled compared to similar waterways in other parts of the country. The Waituna Wetland contains the Waituna Lagoon which is regularly opened to the sea to allow drainage for adjacent agricultural lands and its brackish waters are important habitat for birds, native fish and trout. The wetland also contains many thousand hectares of the Awarua peatland complex. The peatland area is home to the secretive Australasian bittern and the fernbird, both of which have disappeared from much of their former range. A Department of Conservation initiative is underway to extend the existing Waituna

Ecological values

The waters, mudflats and marginal vegetation of Southland's large tidal estuaries and coastal lagoons (Jacobs River Estuary, New River Estuary, Bluff Harbour and Awarua Bay, Waituna Lagoon and Toetoes Harbour) make up the most important bird habitat area in Southland. More than 80 bird species have been sighted in these places, 65 of which are dependent on the estuarine environment for part or all of their life. Southland's estuaries rank alongside Farewell Spit and Lake Ellesmere/Te Waihora as the top three wading-bird habitats in the South Island.

They are internationally important, because from spring to late autumn they become the feeding and breeding grounds for thousands of migratory wading birds from the northern hemisphere.

The Awarua Wetlands are mainly bog rather than swamp. Bogs are rainfed and are characterised by saturated, infertile peat soils. They are dominated by a few well-adapted plants like sphagnum moss, wirerush and mānuka. In contrast, swamps usually have a flow of water carrying nutrients through them.

The wetland vegetation now consists mainly of a

Awarua Bay





Cushion bog
P. J. McClelland

large expanse of wirerush and manuka shrubland, with remnants of forest, flax swamp, red tussockland and estuary fringe saltmarsh and rushland. Each of these communities have their own plant associations. Features of the flora include insectivorous sundews and bladderworts, several plants that are typically found in upland (sub-alpine and alpine) areas and a number of nationally threatened plants. The survival of vegetation sequences from peatbog into forest, peatbog to estuaries and also forest to estuaries is ecologically important. A feature of the peatlands is the abundance of lakes and pools (tarns).

Threats to wetlands

When compared to many wetlands elsewhere in New Zealand, the Awarua Wetlands are relatively intact and weed-free. Despite their importance as wildlife habitat, wetlands and estuaries are often under-appreciated and degraded through rubbish dumping, agricultural run-off, reclamation, trampling by stock, drainage, fire, extraction of sphagnum moss, and introduction of *Spartina* and other weeds.

Weeds are a major threat, although fortunately they are largely confined to boundaries and previously disturbed areas. The major weed threats are gorse, Spanish heath and other plants that can tolerate saturated soils. Weed spread can be encouraged by fires and other disturbance.

Fires are another major threat to the wetland. The frequency of fires has increased since human arrival. Fires have progressively changed the vegetation and each fire sets back the natural succession process.

Recreational use

Recreational use of wetlands for whitebaiting, fishing, waterfowl hunting and other activities is a long established tradition in the Southland community. Whitebait stands, favourite fishing spots and waterfowl hunting sites on public lands have been handed down for several generations, with some families able to boast nearly a century of uninterrupted enjoyment and free access to these wild places. As the wetland becomes better known more people visit to learn about its natural values.

Waituna Landcare Group

The Waituna Landcare Group is composed of dedicated local farmers and recreational users who over the years have worked hard to monitor the health of the Waituna Lagoon. Their aim is to look after the health of the lagoon and its tributaries, and to encourage sustainable land management within their catchment.

Since 2001 they have held regular field days and seminars to educate and inform the community of issues affecting the health of the lagoon. Some of their achievements have included the 'Clean-up Waituna' campaign, water testing of the lagoon and streams, establishment of a native plant propagation unit, the riparian planting of natives within the catchment and assisting DOC with a World Wetland Day celebration at Waituna.

How can you help?

Just a few changes in the way land is managed can make a big difference to water quality and wetland conservation. Planting appropriate plants around wetlands – especially when coupled with fencing to exclude stock – will help stabilise soil and stop nutrient runoff flowing directly into waterways.

Plantings can also provide nesting sites, food and shelter for wildlife, as well as adding to the natural character of the area. Maintenance of water levels helps promote healthy wetland vegetation while preventing weed invasion. Recreational users of waterways should ensure they follow regulations and observe the water care code.

Getting there

Waituna Lagoon is situated on the south coast of the South Island of New Zealand. It is 30 minutes drive from Invercargill and about 2 1/2 hours drive from Dunedin. The lagoon is 10mins drive off the Southern Scenic Route from Mokotua (on an unsealed metal/gravel road).

Further information

For more information about Waituna Lagoon and other wetlands of importance in Southland, contact the Department of Conservation office in Invercargill, or visit www.doc.govt.nz.

Waituna Wetland
W. Cooper

