

# Tītī Islands Biosecurity

## Rodent Dog Surveillance Report

Date range: March - May 2025

Handler & Dog Teams: - Sandy King (Mawson & Gadget)  
- Karen Andrew (Mica)



**Sandy King**

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## **Background**

At present 32 (88%) of the 36 Tītī Islands surrounding Rakiura / Stewart Island are rodent-free. The tītī harvest season extends from 1<sup>st</sup> April – 31<sup>st</sup> May each year, however access to the islands is permitted from 15<sup>th</sup> March to allow birders time to carry out maintenance and prepare for the harvest. A large amount of gear, including food and personal supplies, building materials, fuel, harvest and processing supplies goes to the islands each season via private fishing vessels, charter vessels, and helicopter. Historically, biosecurity relied on the vigilance of the birders and transport operators but is not always at the forefront of the thinking of those travelling.

In 2018 Rakiura Tītī Islands Administering Body (RTIAB) initiated this project to help maintain the rodent-free status of Tītī Islands by using a rodent detection dog to check vessels and freight prior to departure for the Islands. This season was the 8<sup>th</sup> season where rodent detection dog teams have undertaken predeparture biosecurity checks.

## **Project Objectives**

- To maintain the rodent-free status of islands which are currently rodent-free
- To advocate biosecurity behaviours that will help maintain the pest-free status of these islands
- To advocate and normalise biosecurity behaviours in the wider community

## Summary of work

Date range	14 <sup>th</sup> March-14 <sup>th</sup> May (when all known departures ceased)		
Handler & Dog Teams	Sandy King <i>Gadget</i> (Full Certification) and <i>Mawson</i> (Full Certification - Biosecurity)	Karen Andrew <i>Mica</i> (Full Certification)	
Target species	Rodents		
Locations	Te Anau Heli hangar, Ocean Beach, Bluff	Invercargill Airport (Southern Lakes)	Foreshore Road, Bluff (heli landing area for Southern Lakes)
	Island Harbour	Public wharf, Bluff	Halfmoon Bay wharf
Working hours (inclusive of travel + wait time)	36 days equivalent	Boat inspections take an average of 4 hours travel inclusive. Heli inspections take 2 hours travel inclusive. Additional time is required when departures are delayed.	

## Yearly Inspections comparison

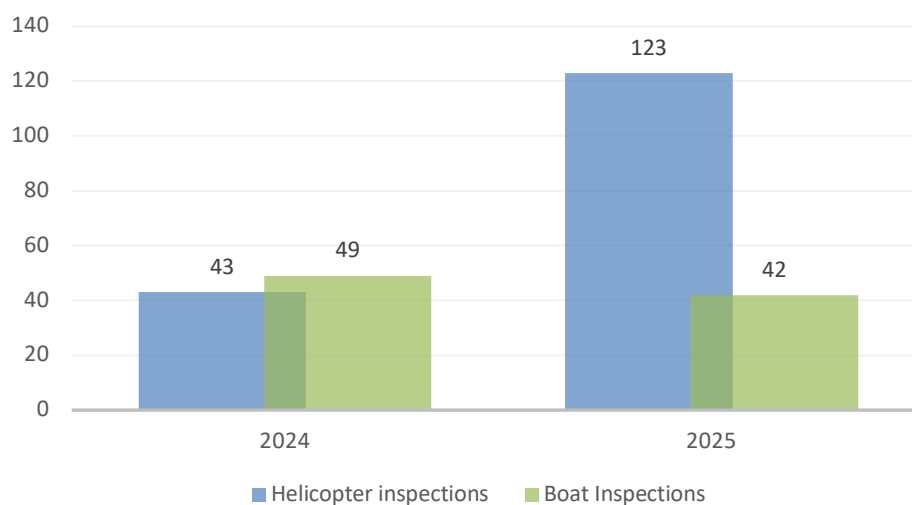


Table 1.0 Comparison of numbers of heli and boat inspections done in 2024 and 2025

## Known and missed inspections 2025

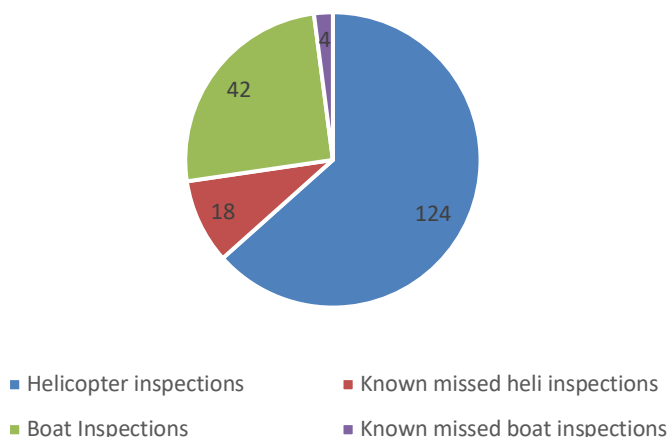


Table 2.0. Number of checks completed along with the known missed checks.

### Vessel inspections

- 14 individual vessels were inspected, one of these was inspected 3 times.
- No live rodents were detected in gear or on vessels.
- No scent was detected on vessels.
- At least 4 vessel departures took place without notification, there were likely more.
- Where possible loads were inspected on the wharf before loading. This is preferable to inspecting tightly packed loads on a vessel.
- The dogs made indications on 10 loads, all of these seemed to be residual scent and no live animals were indicated.
- Bait stations on boats that had them were checked and bait replaced where needed. Most boats with bait stations at the start of the season either had no bait in them at all, or very old bait that was no longer going to be effective. Bait stations must be regularly rebaited to be effective particularly if they are getting wet.

### Helicopter inspections

- Inspections of gear going to the islands on helicopter flights were carried out whenever possible.
- 142 helicopter flights were notified and 124 of these were inspected.
- The number of flights per day varied between 1-14 across 1-3 locations. Not all flights were able to be inspected on every flight day.
- Helicopter departure points where inspections took place included two sites at Bluff (Foreshore Road and Te Anau Helicopter Services hangar at Ocean Beach) and one at Invercargill Airport (Southern Lakes Helicopters).
- Bait stations were present in the Te Anau Heli hangar and both inside and outside the office room at Invercargill airport that was used to store gear occasionally.
- Mice were present at all three heli departure sites and regularly indicated by the dogs.
- There were 5 indications on personal gear.

## Other Risks

- Other biosecurity risks noted included dried vegetation, seeds, and soil. Generally, these items were noticed around the bottom of cages.
- The Rakiura Shipping storage shed at Bluff was checked by the dogs and both rat and mouse sign were found. The risk is higher for gear left in or near this shed for long periods and / or at night.
- The practice of loading but not leaving immediately, sometimes several hours later and often in the dark, risks a rodent boarding after inspection.

## Comment

- The assessment of whether an indication is of a live animal or residual scent is based on the handler's knowledge of their dog's behaviour and is reinforced by questioning the owner of the load on things such as when it was packed, and how the container had been stored prior to and after packing.
- Mice were present at all helicopter departure sites. This poses increased risk if gear is not in rodent-proof containers and is left in hangars or waiting areas for any time and especially overnight. It is worth consulting with operators to consider placing a rodent-proof container in each hangar where gear could be stored if necessary. Te Anau Helicopter Services planned to have a rodent-proof container available at the Ocean Beach hangar however it did not arrive in time for the 2025 season.
- Overall, the response to the project was supportive and enthusiastic. Most birders and vessel operators were very co-operative, as were truck drivers and crane operators who also shared information about the timing of the next loading and put loads on the ground for the dogs to check before loading them on to the boat.

## Recommendations

1. Consider the feasibility of placing a rodent-proof container in each hangar where gear can be safely stored if left overnight before going to the islands. This was discussed previously for the Ocean Beach hangar but it didn't arrive in time.
2. Check that bait boxes with fresh bait are in each hangar in the lead up to the 2025 tītī season ready for when the flights begin.
3. Continue to encourage good biosecurity practices, especially:
  - Use fully rodent-proof containers whenever possible, especially for food items.
  - Clean and inspect containers before packing, pay attention to the bottom of cages.
  - When packing inspect each item for sign of rodents – chews and poos.

- Pack as soon as practical before loading and ensure bags are fully closed.
  - Minimise the time loads are left waiting at the loading site, and if possible do not leave them overnight.
  - Arrange for inspection as close as possible to the time of departure.
4. Help the dogs to work more effectively by minimising distractions, especially remove or contain other dogs while inspections are being carried out.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to the following for their contribution to this project, it is valued and appreciated:

The Rakiura Tītī Islands Administering Body, the Rakiura Tītī Committee, and Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu for continuing to support this project.

The Department of Conservation which covered Karen's time.

Stewart Island Experience gave Sandy and dogs free transport across Foveaux Strait.

All the transport operators – boat skippers and crew, office staff, pilots, ground crew, and truck drivers for their support and patience.

Miriam McFadgen and Steve King for providing accommodation in Bluff for Sandy & dogs.

Karen would like to say thank you to everyone involved for their support and understanding of Kiah (her little apprentice) accompanying her on many of the checks. Without that support she would've been unable to undertake the work.

Finally, a big thanks to the Rakiura Māori tītī whānau for their participation, passion, and enthusiasm to maintain the islands and their taonga.