Concrete gannets have been placed on Mana Island in the hope of encouraging real birds to colonise the cliff tops.

GANNETS LURED BY DECOY

LIFE-LIKE CONCRETE gannets on the cliff tops of Wellington's Mana Island will hopefully be nesting alongside the real thing before too long.

Models of albatrosses and puffins have been used to establish new colonies of those species overseas and the New Zealand Forest and Bird Society and Department of Conservation (DOC) hopes the same concept will work here with gannets.

Early signs for the joint-venture project look promising. It was expected it might take months or even years before passing gannets took some notice of the mock colony, but miraculously, two gannets turned up for a look during the December placement ceremony.

"Just after the waiata had been sung by local school children, two birds landed almost as though we had scripted it," project coordinator and former forest and bird society Wellington branch chairman, Colin Ryder said.

New Zealand's gannet population is thought to be increasing by about 3% a year and most existing colonies, including the closest at Farewell Spit, are out-growing their sites. Predator-free Mana Island, west of Porirua, is seen as a good potential spot for a new site.

The island, which was farmed for about 150 years and briefly used as a quarantine station, is now managed by DOC as a scientific reserve. A native revegetation programme has been under way since 1987 and wetland areas are being recreated. The island is home to six species of lizard and efforts are being made to get tuatara established there and to increase the bird life. Sea birds in particular are valued because the marine nutrients they deposit, in turn help vegetation, insect life and lizard populations to flourish.

About 600m² of vegetation was cleared for the would-be colony, and then painted white to look like guano. It is hoped gannets fishing in Cook Strait will spot it, investigate and eventually nest there alongside the decoy birds.

About 50 birds have been placed there so far and more will be added as they are made.

Twelve are fibre-glass models that were originally used in an exhibit at the 1992 Seville Expo and are no longer required by the Museum of New Zealand. The rest have been made by Lower Hutt model-maker Ron Baker with concrete supplied by Firth Industries Ltd.

The company, and its subsidiary Dricon, offered to co-sponsor the project after the NZ Ready Mix Concrete Association decided not to offer national sponsorship. The companies not only provided advice and the special mortar mix free of charge, but an area at Firth's Lower Hutt yard where nine- and 10-year-old children from Titahi Bay's Ngati Toa School could paint the birds' black wing tips and yellow heads.

The Stout Trust provided $16,000 for the project but Ron Ryder says it couldn't have been done without Firth's assistance.

Firth market development manager for civil and commercial jobs, Len McSaveney, says media interest in the project has been high. "It was a fantastic opportunity to show concrete was environmentally-friendly and could be other than cold, grey and boring," he says.

The material was chosen above others because it could be moulded to the appropriate shape, was hard wearing and "wouldn't fly away". Concrete birds could be produced white to minimise painting and were in no danger of losing their heads, like some polystyrene decoys in Tasmania that were attacked by sea eagles.

"We looked at other materials but decided on concrete because of its weight and durability," Ryder says. "The cliff top is very exposed – something gannets don't seem to mind because they are very efficient fliers."

A high durability concrete originally developed for reflective paving was adapted for the job. It includes white lime sand, white cement and additives to prevent discolouration and lichen-growth, but does not have the reflective glass beads that are in the paving mix.

The mix was produced at Dricon's Tuakau plant in South Auckland and delivered in bags containing just enough ready-mix for one bird. Baker's model-making ingenuity and water was all that was needed to turn the mix into gannets. He sculpted several plaster of paris birds and used them to shape the rubber moulds he needed to produce the concrete versions.

The birds are cast upside down in rectangular wooden boxes containing the floppy rubber moulds which are backed with plaster of paris and polystyrene foam to make them more solid. Pre-made resin beaks are inserted into the moulds before the mix is poured in. When the concrete is hard, Baker opens the boxes and removes the birds.

He's made all sorts of things over the years, including a topographical model of a Brunei housing development and a mini version of the wind farm ECNZ is proposing for Makara.

Seeing live birds fooled by his concrete replicas was one of the highlights.

Above and right: Local school children painted the concrete birds and placed them on Mana Island.

To ensure a realistic-looking community, the models are being made in a variety of poses.

There's a sleeping bird with its head tucked under its wing that was modelled on a wooden sculpture by Kapiti Forest and Bird Society volunteer Janet Atkinson, there's also a sitting bird with a detachable head that can face different directions and the-yet-to-be-produced sky pointer.

As anyone who has visited Cape Kidnapper, Muriwai, or one of the other more remote off-shore colonies will know, gannets are fascinating to watch with a lifestyle to match. The native sea birds leave New Zealand when they are young for some overseas experience – crossing the Tasman to spend three years or longer living and fishing on the Australian coast before returning for good to settle down and breed.

Mainland predators include dogs, cats and ferrets.

DOC conservation scientist Colin Miskelly says a 1980/81 count indicated a growing population in New Zealand of about 53,000 pairs.

The concrete gannets were transported to Mana Island by boat in early December and placed in their new cliff-top home one-by-one by the same children who had named and painted them. The island's ranger will be keeping an eye out for new arrivals and visitors are also being asked to record any sightings.

"After such a promising start, it would be good if we have some nestings by the end of the century," Dr Miskelly says. ●