EASTER
and school holidays

All aboard: A tractor ride with Gannet Beach Adventures is many things to many people – a nice day beside the sea, an opportunity to view amazing wildlife, or a trip back in time as told by the layers in the coastal cliffs at Cape Kidnappers.

Eagle eye: Argentinian scientist Gabriel Machovsky Capuska among his subjects at Cape Kidnappers.

Study reveals birds' amazing strengths

Among the fastest and most agile of seabirds, gannets risk dying of fatal head and neck injuries from accidental collisions in the water when diving for fish at speed, a Massey biology researcher has found.

Argentinian Gabriel Machovsky Capuska has been studying the foraging and feeding behaviour of the Australasian gannet, the distinctive yellow-throated seabird found in 29 colonies around New Zealand's coast, including Hawke's Bay's Cape Kidnappers – a place he has fallen in love with.

He said the underwater collisions captured on video highlight the risk of plunge diving, that is otherwise a successful strategy for gannets to catch small fish and squid.

Fatal collisions occurred during high-density feeding, when two gannets targeted the same fish and one pierced the head or neck of the other.

Footage also captured evidence of kleptoparasitism – literally theft – in which a diving gannet targets a previously caught fish in the beak of another gannet underwater.

Mr Machovsky Capuska had studied colonies at Gannet Rock in the Hauraki Gulf, Cape Kidnappers and Farewell Spit, tagging birds with tiny GPS devices, to track their long-range foraging and diving behaviour.

"I arrived in New Zealand five years ago and went to Muriwai to see the colony there," Mr Machovsky Capuska said.

"I have always been passionate about marine predators and have worked with cormorants.

"I have been lucky enough to visit Antarctica twice and I am used to work in isolation under extreme conditions, so it was fantastic to see the possibilities of working in a place where there is easy access to a colony.

"I was looking for opportunities to do a PhD and made contact with people from various universities but ended up working for NIWA [National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research] in Hamilton in the Benthic Ecology Group.

"During this time, Associate Professor Mark Hauber from Auckland University offered an opportunity to volunteer with a group of PhD students.

"In February 2008 I was privileged to visit Cape Kidnappers and fell in love with the place."

Mr Machovsky Capuska began studying gannets three years ago for his doctoral thesis under the supervision of Professor David Raubenheimer at Massey's Institute of Natural Sciences in Albany, Auckland.

The gannet is familiar to many New Zealanders and colonies at Muriwai and Cape Kidnappers are popular tourist destinations but the scientist suspects few people are aware of gannets' amazing physiological capabilities, needed to survive.

The average gannet at Cape Kidnappers, where 10,000 of New Zealand's 56,000 breeding pairs dwell, sometimes fly up to 500km at 70kmh in a day, to seek out shoals of small pilchards and anchovies.

They must then compete with other foraging seabirds as well as dolphins, whales and sharks as they plunge dive repeatedly from 15m above the sea level to about 20m below and spend up to 42 seconds under water pursuing prey.

Equipped with extraordinary vision, they can adapt their optical capability in a split-second from air to water, while effectively blocking out ultra-violet light reflection that distorts the position of darting prey.

Mr Machovsky Capuska said his study, due to be completed later this year, provides new insights into the foraging behaviour of gannets, which as a species are valuable indicators of changes to the marine environment.

Better understanding of the anatomy and physiology of gannet necks could also have implications for understanding the dynamics of neck injuries in humans who dive, he said.

Mr Machovsky Capuska received an award for excellence from the NZ Institute of Natural Science in 2011.

"I love working with the gannets and I have had wonderful support from the Massey University Research funding, the Institute of Natural Sciences, owners of Cape Kidnappers farm, the Department of Conservation and the Te Awanga Motor Camp.

"I am now writing my thesis and would like, in future, to work in collaboration with the National Aquarium of New Zealand."

He is now resident here, married to a New Zealander, and has a "Kiwi son".

"Now I'm just working on my Kiwi accent," the researcher said.

Great Urban Race ready to be run

Twists and challenges will all be part of the a fundraiser for Plunket's new regional centre in Onekawa.

Participants will need their sneakers and pumped up bike tyres, and have their brain engaged for the inaugural Great Urban Race in Napier on April 21.

Teams will race around Napier in a series of challenges set to test both mind and body. In an added twist, the route and challenges will be revealed to competitors only half an hour before the start of the race, said Plunket Hawke's Bay's Nicki McGavock.

"The event is all about strategy. Teams will race to different locations, completing challenges along the way. It's up to the teams to decide what order they complete their tasks in order to get maximum points. It's the perfect combination of using brains and brawn."

The race will start with a briefing at Speight's Ale House in Ahuriri at 12.30pm, where the challenges will be revealed. The starter's gun will go off at 1pm.

"Families, work colleagues and friends are encouraged to get a team of four together for this very good cause," says Ms McGavock.

See classichits.co.nz.

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Your Backyard

With the days getting shorter, keen gardeners know that autumn is the best time of year to plant. The friendly staff at The Garden Depot Napier have some fantastic savings to help make your end-of-summer garden really special.

Owner, Alex knows how passionate Hawke's Bay gardeners are and has an exceptional Easter Sale with 20% off all plants. "Autumn is my favourite time of the year and is certainly the best period to make additions to the garden, such as trees and hedges. By planting fruit trees now it will allow them to 'bed in' during the cold months and be settled ready for spring growth, ensuring that they become established before the heat of summer."

"We also have a wonderful selection of winter annuals like pansies, violas and primulas to add winter colour, as well as everyone's favourite spring bulbs to herald the return of the warmer weather." All of the stock at The Garden Depot Napier is vibrant and healthy and they are willing to back this with the policy that should any of their plants fail to grow they'll replace them free of charge and give further advice to ensure success.

For those who love a splash of colour on the deck or patio,we have a great range of pots, decor and wall art in all colours and sizes, to brighten up those dull winter days. The staff at The Garden Depot Napier would like to wish you all a very Happy Easter.

The Garden Depot

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