



# *Out 'n' About*

Newsletter of the Southland  
Natural History Field Club

**Vol 11 Issue No. 4 May 2011**

**Meeting Thursday 12 May 7.30**

**at the Hearing Association meeting rooms, 126 Leet Street  
Committee meeting 7pm**

**Subantarctic Megaherbs - a 20 year study of  
Subantarctic Island flora**

**Brian Rance**

Coming up...

**Fieldtrip:** Saturday 28 May - A leisurely drive up the coast to Tautuku checking out the sights and short walks. 9am at the museum \$15 for driver. Please let Lloyd know if you are interested

**Free Plant Propagation Days:** - Native Plants from Cuttings 10 and 17 June 10am-noon at the Southland Community Nursery [www.southlandcommunitynursery.org.nz](http://www.southlandcommunitynursery.org.nz)  
Book with Chris Rance - [rances@ihug.co.nz](mailto:rances@ihug.co.nz)

## **Forest and Bird Winter Talks and Working Days**

### **New Venue for Talks**

**Holy Trinity Anglican Church Hall 61 King Street Windsor 7.30pm**

(except the AGM which starts at 7pm)

**Tuesday 10 May 2011 – AGM and talk – “Waitutu Revisited”** – the aerial operation and the changes that have occurred since in the Waitutu Forest – Colin Bishop. AGM starts at 7pm.

**Weekend 14/15 May 2011 – Tautuku Lodge working weekend in the Catlins** (Book with Tony Bretherick 2186137 for free accommodation).

**Tuesday 14 June 2011 – “Darwin’s finches and other Galapagos highlights”** with Forest and Bird’s Southern Field Officer Sue Maturin who spent 3 months there with partner Graham Loh studying mangrove finches and exploring the wonderful Galapagos islands.



### **Cattle Egrets in Southland**

Field club members should be on the look out for Cattle Egrets around Southland as April/May is their usual arrival time in New Zealand.

They can often be seen feeding amongst cattle and in the past have formed larger flocks in areas such as near Wallacetown.

Numbers reached a peak in the 80s and 90s but in the last few years numbers seem to have dropped quite dramatically. There were always hopes that they would breed and they often attained breeding plumage in New Zealand but breeding has never been confirmed.

The 1984 census in Southland recorded 166 birds which had risen from around 58 in 1980. While numbers are now much lower we would still like to know how many are arriving in Southland and we ask anyone spotting them to give Lloyd or myself a call with any information. Here are some of the 1984 census district totals: Te Anau 1, Croydon 3, Wyndham 54, Centre Hill 1, Hokonui 6, Papatotara 11, Orepuki 1, Waianawa 12, New River Estuary 24, Makarewa 32, Waimatua 7, Rimu 14. The Te Anau district seems to have been a staging post for some birds passing over the Southern Alps and there were reports of 16 at Milford Sound on 11-20/04/84 with smaller groups at Te Anau and Manapouri, these birds then dispersed further around Southland.

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## **New Ornithological regional representative for Southland**

Neil Robertson has been appointed new Southland Representative for the OSNZ. Neil is also a member of the Field Club and has a keen interest in birding and has been on a number of overseas birding trips to such diverse places as South America and India.

He works for Real Journeys in Te Anau and has considerable knowledge about the birds around the Fiordland area and supplies us with many interesting snippets of sightings and also his work with the Yellowhead transfer of birds from Breaksea Island to Pomona Island on Lake Manapouri.

We wish Neil well in his new role and he is already planning some outings for the future.

Also many thanks to Lloyd Esler who has been the regional rep for a number of years.

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## **February 2011 Wader count**

Our February wader count actually became a March count due to weather and availability of counters. Areas covered were Awarua Bay (head of bay, Cow Island), New River Estuary (Shellbanks and Jocks Roost), Haldane, Fortrose and Riverton. Those taking part were Rob Schuckard, Phil Rhodes, Lloyd Esler and Wynston Cooper.

Results were: Variable Oystercatcher 21; South Island Pied Oystercatcher 780; Pied Stilt 32; New Zealand Dotterel 8; Banded Dotterel 86; Spur-winged Plover 11; Turnstone 150; Sanderling 1; Bar-tailed Godwit 1725; Red Knot 152; Red-necked Stint 3; Royal Spoonbill 146

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## **Great Shearwater at Stewart Island**

Stewart Island continues to produce the rarities with Brent Stephenson and others observing a Great Shearwater flying around their boat during a pelagic trip off Stewart Island. One had been seen previously at Kaikoura and a few were spotted in Australia recently and there was also one off the Dunedin coast in 2008 but this is a first for Southland and possibly 4 or 5<sup>th</sup> sighting for New Zealand.

These birds breed on islands in the South Atlantic such as the Tristan da Cunha and Gough Island. It eats small fish and squid.

It is unknown why a few Great Shearwaters uncharacteristically choose to migrate in an east west direction, or whether those that take this atypical route manage to return to their breeding grounds. One theory is that they follow other birds, such as albatrosses, instead of the instinctual migration journey taken by the vast majority of their species. Great Shearwaters have however, been recorded in most of the world's oceans, including as far north as California, in the Pacific Ocean.

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**Remember, Field club outing photos are available to view on the Invercargill Environment Centre's website as well as Lloyd's page. Go to [www.iec.org.nz](http://www.iec.org.nz)**

**Otters** I (Lloyd) heard about an otter sighting near Tuatapere.

There have been a good number of otters sighted over the years but this one was particularly interesting as it is at least the fifth from the lower Waiau catchment. In addition, the spotter, John Templeton, had seen the animal enter a burrow.

About 10 March he was catching freshwater lobsters in a stream

that runs through beech forest in the Grove Burn catchment about 10km west of Tuatapere. He heard the sound of a small animal running and caught a glimpse of a darkish mammal larger than a rat which ran into a hole in the bank just above water level. His impression was that it was an otter. On 23 April I visited the stream (above) with John. We found the hole which was below water level due to the amount of water in



the stream but there were no footprints or signs of fresh activity. I intend to re-visit the place sometime and continue looking for footprints. Maybe a tracking tunnel would be useful.

On Tuesday 26 April, 13 Field Club members did the Tiwai Point walk, following the coast from the carpark around to Toetoes Bay, crossing behind the smelter and returning via Bluff Harbour. About 8 kilometres it was reckoned. We inspected the grave of Captain Stirling and another overgrown grave not far from the old wharf.

(left) John Hall-Jones' book *Bluff Harbour* gives details of the latter. It is the grave of Alex Dunlop who was killed aboard the immigrant vessel *New Great Britain* in 1863 and was buried on arrival at Bluff.



### Blackberries

In case you hadn't

noticed, the 2011 blackberry harvest was a vintage one. The right combination of warmth and moisture and freedom from disease and caterpillars meant that the canes were drooping with fruit. Blackberries make excellent jam. Weight the fruit, melt it without adding water and boil with an equal weight of sugar until you guess, probably wrongly, that it will set. But never mind! The jam is delectable whether it has the consistency of peanut butter, golden syrup, lemonade or granite.



**Giant wasp** On 10 April I was summoned to a Bryson Road house where the family had trapped a large wasp in their lounge. It was very impressive. It was female *Megarhyssa nortoni*, New Zealand's largest wasp, over 10cm long. It isn't a good flier and was easy to catch. I kept it for several days and impressed various kids with it, then let it go. The wasp was introduced to NZ from North America in 1964. It is a parasite of *Sirex*, the Woodwasp or Steel-blue horntail borer, a pine forest pest.

The Giant wasp doesn't sting so can be handled with impunity but try to convince kids of that!! The longest one I measured was 14cm. Another was picked up in Invercargill on 29/4/11.



**Marsh crake:** John Taylor picked up a dead Marsh crake on 30/4 on the track at the Sutton Lagoon, the former Invercargill rubbish tip. The bird was missing a head and had probably been predated by a stoat. John has often seen stoats in the



area. While it is good to know that there are crakes there, the loss to a predator is regrettable.

### Dactylanthus or Wood rose

A resident of Ohai phoned enquiring about Dactylanthus. *Dactylanthus taylori* is a parasitic plant attached to totara roots. The plant is underground but it sends up a flower head (left) and the pollination is done by bats, amongst other creatures. It's one of our rarest plants, formerly much threatened by land clearance but more recently by possums which eat the flowers. Dactylanthus is only found in the North Island. The enquirer is certain he is finding the plant attached to roots washed up on lake shores. I think he is finding beech galls instead. There are woody lumps ranging in size from marble to barrel. The fungus is *Cyttaria gunnii* or Beech strawberry. Each year the gall (right) sprouts a crop of rubbery fungi which look a bit like strawberries and surprisingly, taste like them as well. I await his specimen with interest. This information is on the DoC website:



*Dactylanthus (Dactylanthus taylorii)*

is a highly unusual plant, and holds a special place in New Zealand's indigenous flora as the only fully parasitic flowering plant.

This fascinating plant grows as a root-like stem attached to the root of a host tree. In response to dactylanthus, the host root moulds into the shape of a fluted wooden rose, which gives the plant its previous common name of wood rose. It is through this placental-like attachment that dactylanthus draws all its nutrients. The Maori name for dactylanthus is pua o te reinga, meaning 'flower of the underworld,' and alludes to the way its flowers emerge from below ground.

Dactylanthus is currently regarded as being in serious decline. A Department of

Conservation Recovery Plan is in action. An unrelated plant, actually a tropical mistletoe, produces a wood rose on the wood of the branches rather resembling the scar on the totara roots left by Dactylanthus. Souvenirs are carved from the strange growths which are called parasite wood. The host wood is often the Chinaberry tree *Melia azedarach* of the mahogany family Meliaceae. The photo shows a lizard carved from parasite wood. The other two objects are totara roots with wood roses caused by Dactylanthus attachment to the roots. Several times when we were kids we were given a sack of Dactylanthus to boil up (horrors). When boiled, the hard lump on the roots



softened and turned crimson. With a wire brush we scraped off the Dactylanthus, exposing the wood rose on the root.

**Kidzone 20-25 July inclusive:** The Environment Centre will be running its usual range of educational and environmental activities for kids. I am running the plaster casting activity. I'd like at least one adult accomplice for some of the time and the Environment Centre activity needs adult helpers as well. Anyone available?

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