

Birds New Zealand

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Otago Region Newsletter 4/2014 June 2014

Memories of Miranda; an account of one day in the life of a Volunteer Guide.



What could be better... heading out to the hide each day under wide open skies, over the flat chenier plains with the Coromandel ranges to the east, in anticipation of what will be seen, with binoculars at the ready and telescope over one shoulder. The track from the Shorebird Centre, leading 2.5 km to the hide through tall flowering fennel, is paved with shell and takes you parallel to the coast behind the fringe of mangroves. You first see the Stilt Pond, remnants from the days of the limeworks, still with some shallow water and now a mecca for shorebirds. The wide expanse of dry brown mud between the elevated track and the water is the favoured high tide roosting site for most of the waders, especially when tides fill the shallow bay between the outer shell bank and the shore. As you approach the brown mud area a large smudge of grey can be seen, which, when closer, turns into a flock of about 1500 wrybill – grey and white, just like small smooth river boulders strewn over the mud. This colouring had served these little birds very well when nesting on the braided rivers of the South Island just a few months ago.

Now it is time to set up the telescope. If the breeze is from the sea, the wrybills will be facing into it and facing you, and if they are preening you get clear views of their bills that turn to the right. Later they relax on one leg with bill tucked under wing. Banded dotterel have also returned from breeding in the South Island to spend the winter at Miranda; they hang out together around the edge of the wrybill flock. The smudge of brownish fawn and reddish pink at the back of the wrybill flock turns out to be about 600 red knots. And a dozen turnstone choose a dry grassy patch in the mud to roost, camouflaged by their striking black, white and rusty colours. About 200 pied stilt rest nearer the water in the shelter of the rushes; several nearly-black hybrids are present. White-faced herons are stalking prey in the drains around the ponds. A young harrier hawk flies over and disturbs the birds into a spectacular display of whirling, circling flocks but they soon settle back down.

The main hide is about 500m further on overlooking the shallow bay that has formed behind the shell bank. The shell path comes to the hide directly behind it so as you approach the birds cannot see you and you can't see them; you just hear their chattering and then suddenly the first view of 4000 godwits assembled before you is breathtaking. Many of the godwits are already resting, standing on one leg, long bill tucked under their wing, others are shuffling in with the tide, others flying in from deeper water and some are still feeding, probing down into the soft mud pulling out marine worms. In the right light the breeding colours of the godwits glow rusty red. In the distance on the far gleaming white shell bank is a distinct black ribbon made by thousands of South Island pied oystercatchers. Through the telescope scanning from the tip of the shell bank, as well as all the SIPO, you can spot black shags, pied shags, Caspian terns, white-fronted terns, black-billed gulls, grey teal, white-faced herons and a few black-backed gulls. Occasionally a gannet is seen diving in the Firth. For some unexplained reason all the oystercatchers and godwits take to the air – a magical sight.

Within half an hour of the tide turning the mudflats of the bay are again exposed. Pied stilts are the first to come back to feed as they can wade in water with their longer legs. Most of the godwits are content to wait until the huge expanses of intertidal zones are exposed before they head out to feed, but some are eager to feed as soon as the tide recedes. They are fascinating to watch; the godwits get black faces and bills from probing in

the sticky mud and resemble a new species – black-billed godwits. Red-billed gulls have learned to harass a godwit once it has extracted a worm to scare it into dropping it thus giving the gull a free meal. Small flocks of wrybill start to fly in to the bay from their roost site at the Stilt Pond. They scamper over the mud, and even they sink into it, ankle deep; they usually take small crustaceans and insects off the surface but also worms that come to the surface.

The few rare arctic waders are hard to spot when roosting with the other birds, but show themselves more clearly when they start feeding as they have their own characteristics. Two sharp-tailed sandpipers probe more deliberately and slowly and through the telescope their dark brown feathers bordered in buff make this a very handsome little bird. Several other birds delicately probing in the mud keep their distance from the others. Their bills are long and down-curved – they are curlew sandpipers. It is a special treat to see these waders that are uncommon in New Zealand. Another sweep of the telescope around the bay reveals about a dozen birds – smaller than godwits but larger than wrybills, standing almost motionless, with large dark eyes and striking gold-edged plumage – these are the Pacific golden plover. Over by the edge of the channel, three tiny fawn and white birds are dashing about, pecking furiously – red-necked stints. By about two hours after high tide the bay is nearly empty of birds, which are now spread out over the thousand of hectares of mudflats exposed at low tide. The oystercatchers are still on the shell bank as they are waiting for the cockle beds to be exposed at the lowest tide.

So back to the Shorebird Centre with the last of the visitors, along the track by the Stilt Pond. It's still worth a closer look as sharp-tailed sandpipers often feed on the sandy edges of the Stilt Pond and the Marsh sandpiper might also be hanging out with the pied stilts. A view of this small, very smart grey and white bird, with long green legs, neatly feeding along the water edge is the final treat for the day. Across the pond, over the road, the Royal spoonbills are still roosting in their favourite macrocarpa tree – large white dots on dark green. Most of these birds are juveniles, spending the time before maturity in the endless summer of the north. The 2 km trudge in the heat is punctuated by skylarks trilling, yellowhammers calling from the mangroves, and on one very special occasion, a harsh 'craarck' and seeing a disturbed bittern flying past at eye level back to the cover of the fennel behind.

Mary Thompson February 2014

Notes from the Regional Representatives Meeting and NZ Bird Conference

This was held in glorious weather at Palmerston North at Queens Birthday weekend. Mary attended the RR meeting and Bruce the Council meeting prior to the conference. Keith Woodley, Mel Galbraith and Stefanie Grosser were elected to council. Next NZ Bird Conference will be held at Blenheim with the theme of the Birds and the People and will be the 75th anniversary.

Possible national projects were discussed.

The Scientific Committee is exploring methods to adopt for a new national project on bird abundance, although this project is still a ways off.

A national survey of red-billed gulls was proposed as the last survey was 50 years ago. Surprisingly the population of this common gull is declining and is scored as nationally vulnerable. This project will probably start with the 2014 breeding season. More info next newsletter.

A national dabchick survey is also being planned; as far as we know they are not present in Otago, but all the same we should keep a look out for the first arrivals as they seem to be moving southwards.

Survey of waterfowl on sewage treatment ponds; proposed that monthly surveys be done on these ponds to determine usage and importance of these permanent patches of water. Murray Williams is coordinating this survey.

NZ Birds Online and eBird

Since its launch at the NZ Birds Conference in Dunedin last year this site has had over half million hits. Dunedin is 4th in the list of cities in NZ using the site, and tui is the bird with most hits. Everyone is encouraged to enter their birding on eBird.

Conference Scientific Days

There were a nice variety of talks many featuring the research being done at Massey. Two of our students also presented papers – Stefanie Grosser explained new genetic analyses she has done on Little Blue Penguins; the Otago birds are most closely related to the Australian ones and may be a

sub-species. Benedikt Holtmann talked about his studies on the bold and shy personalities of the dunnocks in the Botanic Garden.

A keynote address by Graeme Taylor of DOC gave us enthralling new information about the movements of shearwaters, petrels and prions gained from the use of geolocator data loggers.

The value of long-term surveys, such as we are doing with our Harbour survey and wader counts, were highlighted by talks about Pauatahanui inlet, Manawatu estuary and Tiritiri.

Workshops There was a choice of eBird, photography or identification of seabird wrecks.



Alan Tennyson of Te Papa explained the challenges, the possibilities of exciting finds, and the value of the information gathered by the Beach Patrol scheme, and then gave us a stunning display of his bird identification skills, by identifying birds from their remains at the rate of more than 1 a minute. Equipment to add to your birding kit for beach patrol include callipers for measuring bill length and width, ruler, plastic bags and gloves; also photos of underwing, close-ups of head from side and top are crucial for id. Label any finds with location, date and collectors name (Te Papa will arrange transport to museum if still need positive id.). Otago beaches do not usually give us many washed up seabird wrecks, but now I think we should make an effort to do some beach patrols particularly after an easterly storm.

Field trips



The sunny, calm weather meant great field trips on Monday. At the Manawatu estuary all the regulars were seen plus two glossy ibis; at Bushy Park NI robins, saddlebacks and stitchbirds and at Mt Bruce a behind the scenes tour, seeing the

white kiwi, shore plover breeding aviaries and dozens of kaka.

Mary Thompson

Description and measurements of nests of New Zealand Passerines Part 1 Introduced species

For the descriptions the Field Guide to the Birds of New Zealand has been followed.

For the measurements of the nests (in cm) the following material has been used:

Otago Museum Collection, Birding New Zealand member's collections, Handbook of the Birds of Europe, Middle East and North Africa and Handbook of Australia, New Zealand and Antarctica.

Note: measurements of the nests are o dia (outside diameter), i dia (inside diameter), cup depth and total height.

Dunnock: Nest is a neat bowl of twigs, grass and moss, lined with hair, wool, feathers, tree fern scales and moss.

Measurements: o dia 10, i dia 6, cup depth 3.5, total height 7.

Chaffinch: Nest is a neat cup of dry grass and moss, camouflaged with lichen, and lined with hair, feathers and wool.

Measurements: o dia 9, i dia 5, cup depth 4, total height 7

Greenfinch: Nest is bulky and untidy, built of twigs, dry grass, moss, rootlets and wool, lined with finer material and wool.

Measurements: o dia 12, i dia 4, cup depth 4, total height 7.5

Goldfinch: Nest is a delicate cup of dry grass, fine twigs, moss, wool and cobwebs, lined with thistledown and wool.

Measurements: o dia 8, i dia 4, depth of cup 4, total height 5

Redpoll: Nest is a small neat cup of dry grass, fine twigs, moss, wool and cobwebs, lined with feathers, willow catkins, wool, and hair.

Measurements: o dia 9, i dia 5, depth of cup 4, total height 6

Blackbird: Nest is a substantial cup of twigs, grass, roots and moss, bound together with mud and roughly lined with grass and leaf skeleton.

Measurements: o dia 15, i dia 10, depth of cup 7, total height 12

Song Thrush: Nest is a substantial cup of twigs, grass, roots and moss, bound together with mud and smoothly lined, with mud, or a mixture of rotten wood and saliva.

Measurements: o dia 15, i dia 10, depth of cup 6.4, total height 10

Peter Schweigman



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Ornithological Snippets

Jill Hamel sent in a couple of urban **NZ Falcon** sightings. "One flew over me in the Town Belt at 10.30 am Tuesday 10 June at the junction of Leven and Scarba Streets, flying west to east and causing the local bellbirds to produce vigorous alarm calls. Another flew over Ribbonwood Nursery, corner of Glenelg and Ronay Streets at 4.30 pm June 12, flying east to west, without causing a commotion. Both times the birds were purposefully going somewhere, rather than hunting."

A **White Heron** has been reported by several residents around Hawksbury Lagoon. It was first seen on 5 June and was still there on 27 June. At least one remains at Tomahawk Lagoon. Last report is by Bruce McKinlay on 14 June.

Peter Johnson has been watching **Black-backed Gulls** or as Graeme Loh puts it, those hasslers and pirates. "14 June 2014. Waikouaiti River, tidal reach at Karitane, midday with incoming tide: a solitary **Black-backed Gull** landed in mid-river, to just sit float there. (For what purpose I wondered). Then, when a **Caspian Tern** dived for a fish, c. 80m away, and took to the wing, the gull instantly took off in pursuit, to catch up and do some aerial wheeling around, but the tern (and its catch) seemed to escape. About 2011: Purakaunui Inlet, where the main channel is like a river, c.150 m wide at mid-tide: we saw a fledgling bird, probably a Blackbird but maybe a sparrow, attempt to fly across the waterway, but it lost strength and ditched about three-quarters of the way across. A **Black-backed Gull** on the far shore was also watching, and very quickly was at the ditching site, to predate the fledgling."



For the last year John Darby has been following the fortunes of **Crested Grebes** on Lakes Wanaka, Hayes and Dunstan and is promising a note to the newsletter on this work. Left one of the pairs he's been looking at.

From ebird Mark Ayre came up with a **Little Owl** and a **NZ Falcon** south of Lake Hawea on 22 June. Recent records for Otago, or anywhere else in the world, can now be more easily accessed on ebird. See instructions in Jim Wilson's article below.

Notices and Business

eBird Report

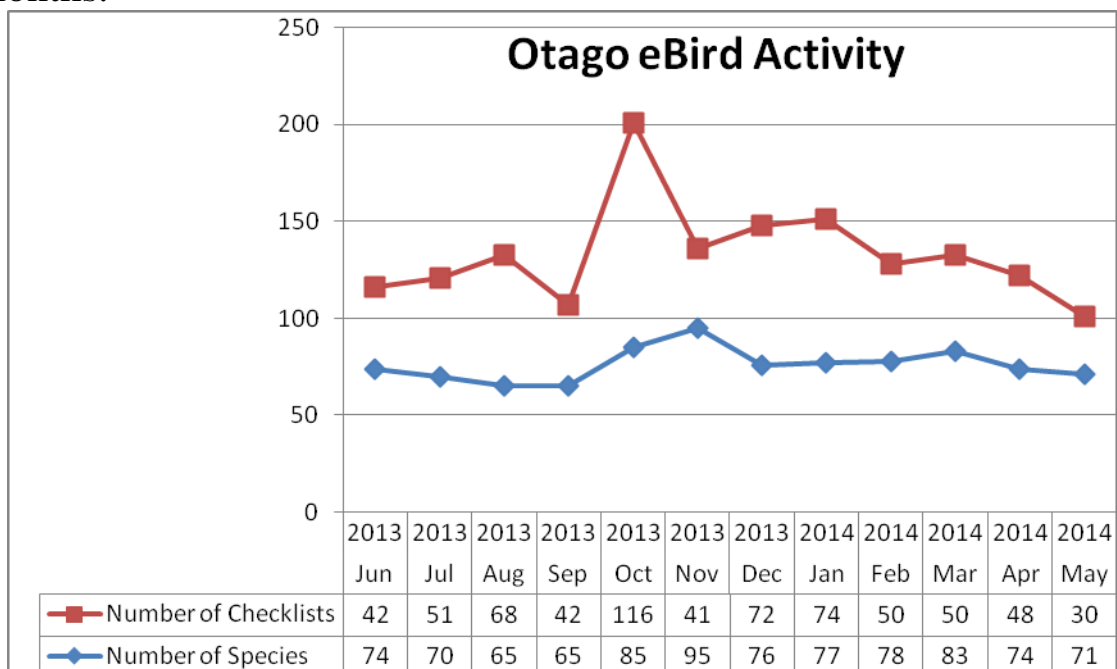
Well winter is definitely here, with long winter nights and cold winter days. This makes it an ideal time to catch up with entering your data in to eBird.

When looking at what birding activity had been recorded in eBird for Otago over time I found that for “all years” 163 species (5891 checklists) had been recorded and for the “current year” 95 species (252 checklists)

If you want to explore this data set for Otago or any other location, the steps are as follows;

1. Log on to ebird.org
2. Select “Explore Data” tab
3. Click on “Explore a Location
4. Type in location e.g. Otago, NZ.

As previously reported here is the eBird data for Otago for the preceding 12 months.



Also please remember that it is critical when you are birding in groups that only one person enters the data in eBird. This is to ensure the integrity of the eBird data for Otago.

Jim Wilson Regional Recorder

Banded Tui and Bellbirds

Murray Efford has been busy again this summer and autumn and has banded another 70 tui and bellbird at his place in Helensburgh. It is crucial for the project that re-sightings are made and recorded. The tui and bellbirds will be starting to come to feeders soon so keep a good look out. Murray is overseas until August but is keen for us to be looking out for banded birds. Please record any sightings of banded birds and send information to Murray Efford email murray.efford@otago.ac.nz; or post to 60 Helensburgh Road, Dunedin 9010. Include location, date, time, left leg: colour over metal; right leg: top colour over bottom colour. Also take a digital photo if at all possible.

Dead Shags and Penguins

A paper giving the results of a dna and morphometric study of Stewart Island and Chatham Island Shags is available at:-

<http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0090769>

Results indicate that Otago and Foveaux Strait Stewart Island Shags comprise "two regional groups (Otago and Foveaux Strait) that show consistent differentiation in relative frequencies of pied versus dark-bronze morphotypes, the extent of facial carunculation, body size and breeding time."

However don't stop collecting those dead shags or penguins (all species, including feathers, bones and eggshell), especially from areas south of Dunedin (Taieri Island, Catlins). The samples will be used for genetic analysis in Martyn Kennedy, Hamish Spencer and Nic Rawlence shag and penguin research. We have a DoC holding permit and samples can be collected for us without a permit; we just inform DoC (the system we have been using as approved by Bruce McKinlay).

If remains are good it would probably be a good idea to place in plastic bag, seal, label! and put in freezer. Contact Nic and he will arrange pick-up.

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Programme 2014

Monthly Indoor Meetings will be held in the Benham Seminar Room, Benham Building, Department of Zoology, 340 Great King Street.

Note change of time to 7.30 p.m.

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| Saturday July 5 | Field trip: Dunedin Botanic Gardens
Start 1 pm at Information Centre beside Café.
This will be a recce to find out what birds are in the gardens in preparation for the Bioblitz the following weekend. Alan Baker will lead us around various areas of the garden where birds are likely to be feeding. |
| Saturday July 12 | Bioblitz, Dunedin Botanic Gardens, 10.00am to 4.00 pm. Contact Mary 464 0787 if you can help. |
| Wed July 23 | Junichi Sugishita. Royal Parenting - foraging strategies and risks in N. Royal Albatross. |
| Wed August 27 | Kalinka Rexer-Huber and Graeme Parker. 'Birds of the Falkland Islands and S.Georgia.' |
| Wed September 24 | Jean Fleming. 'Learning to be a "birder" a report on Heritage Expedition's Birding the Pacific.' |
| Wed October 22 | Derek Onley. The birds of Hawksbury Lagoon-results of 4 years of surveys. |
| Wed November 26 | Bruce McKinlay, Birding around the world. |

Newsletter editor: Derek Onley, derekonley@yahoo.com
Many thanks to all who contributed.

Final date for copy for next newsletter 17 July.