



Birds New Zealand

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Otago Region Newsletter 3/2015 March 2015

Tomahawk Times



Two little owls continue calling occasionally from close to Tomahawk Lagoon, but more often from the pines plantation on a farm upstream from Lagoon Creek.

The welcome swallows' two nests in the bus shelter are now empty of course, but relying on previous years are likely to be used again next spring. One of the two nests seems to have two storeys, but there were only two separate swallow families in the shelter.

The swallow families were tolerant of each others' close presence, but waiting for the bus sometimes included being told off by a darting twittering swallow which zoomed close to our faces until the human

moved the right distance away from the bus stop. The structure is there for the swallows after all, and we are allowed to use it in their off season, which is kind as the weather deteriorates then.

Welcome swallows continue hawking insects over the lagoons and among shoreline trees. One hot summer evening, a swallow repeatedly raced along close beside a large blue damselfly, overtaking and not trying to catch it, but eagerly grabbing smaller insects. Recently, two swallows were flying low, almost touching the water, then making a split second pause to bill contact dip and snatch an insect from the water surface and fly on again.

Large numbers of juvenile paradise shelducks are still around, feeding in lagoon shallows and grazing farmland, in groups of six to more than 30. Numbers seem fairly evenly matched between males and females. One dusk at the end of February at the lower lagoon outlet I was puzzled for a while by a strange lone duck feeding by swimming under bank vegetation, which caused much excitement among pied stilts. The duck was almost entirely very dark brown with chestnut wing stripes, a scruffy white blob on the head and a white triangle on the chest, a female juvenile paradise shelduck still completing her new plumage. All the other paradise shelducks were in crowds on the hillside and upper lagoon, when she fell asleep alone at the outlet.

Royal spoonbills, singles and in groups of up to six birds, are feeding on both lagoons. The raupo cove shallows is a favourite drop in site for them, a good place as disturbance from people is unlikely there. Unlike previous years, they seem to have stopped using the upper lagoon northern shallows, where disturbance by people and dogs is likely especially on weekends. Previously, spoonbills were more likely to be seen in the northern shallows on week days in bad weather, or after dark, but they seem more interested in other places now. Also, the northern shallows are starting to smell rotten, with aquatic weed and debris accumulating there from southerly winds. A pukeko pair and their youngster are still active there and along Lagoon Creek.

I haven't seen any more kingfishers since end of February. One or two usually appear around April and stay over for winter, before disappearing in spring. A pair of kingfishers stayed over through last spring and

summer, ranging widely over the lagoons and gardens and streets. A local starling almost perfected mimicking kingfisher call. At times the most adventurous kingfisher darting around in suburban gardens could be heard exchanging calls with the other one which stayed close to the lagoon, and then the starling would try its trick. Despite noting three places especially favoured by kingfishers, searches for a nest were unsuccessful. Two very old, long unused tunnels and nest chambers were found, but they are too collapsed and vulnerable to ground predators to be used again.

Late afternoon of 17 March gave an hour of good bird watching. In the raupo cove, hidden from most views, six spoonbills in a row across the channel shallows were feeding energetically, advancing like ghostly scythe harvesters. They had the shallows between deeper water and shore so neatly divided between them.

Meanwhile, on the upper lagoon where the bed suddenly shelves off into deeper water, a lot of activity happened. Eight shoveler ducks, evenly matched males and females with bright plumage flew in and joined several mallard ducks, two female paradise shelducks, and a lone little shag all swimming and feeding in a circle in the same area. Something exciting was happening underwater there. One juvenile female mallard kept following the little shag around, and swam very close to it each time it surfaced. The shag ignored her and the other birds, and kept fishing, catching 60 mm silver - white long bodied fish, probably either small trout or galaxids. The estimated line of each dive from when the shag plunged under to when it surfaced followed the submerged sand shelf at the edge of deep water. The shag got a fish for roughly every seven dives, which is better than I did last time with a fly rod. At the same time, two bellbirds were foraging and singing in overhead trees.

April is anticipated, with prospects for unusual visitors as occurred previously. In early May, Canada geese will arrive. A group of six to fifteen geese seem to keep a tradition that this is the place to be in that season.

Andrew Austin

Ornithological Snippets



photo Judy Rash

An **Erect-crested Penguin** was found at Nugget Point by Judy Rash, a visiting Canadian birder on 28 February. Unfortunately the bird had a large growth at the base of its bill and did not look very healthy. Erect-crested Penguins breed mainly on the Antipodes and Bounty Islands but a few occasionally turn up on the Otago coast, the most recent apparently at Curio Bay in September 2013.

Apart from the large flock of **White-fronted** along with a few **Black-fronted Terns** at Aramoana and the occasional fly-by **Northern Giant Petrel**, the sea was quiet for the time of year. Until Jason Wilder had a look from Cape Saunders:-

"I took my scope out to Cape Saunders today to see what was blowing past. I had a little trouble finding a legal place to see the ocean (lots of "Private Property" signs out there!), but eventually found a path out to the promontory west of the lighthouse. There were lots of great birds just below the cape, including **Buller's Shearwater** (first time I've run across

this in NZ), 4 kinds of albatross, lots of **Sooty Shearwaters**, a **White-chinned petrel**, and I'm fairly confident a **Flesh-footed Shearwater**."



Janet Ledingham photographed this female colour banded **Bar-tailed Godwit** at Aramoana on 9 March. It was banded at Awarua Bay, Southland in October 2004, so may well have travelled nearly 300,000km back and forth to Siberia in that time.

There were still 133 godwits at Karitane on 5 March but numbers had fallen to less than 100 in Blueskin Bay by 12 March.

And if you are out Portsmouth Drive, keep an eye out for **Partridge** like birds. Yolanda van Heezik "received this sighting of a partridge on Portsmouth Drive. We haven't ever come up with a partridge in any of our counts, and I was wondering if the Ornithological Society knows anything about partridges in Dunedin."



Ornithological Society hunt saboteurs disrupt Portsmouth Drive partridge shoot.

Notices and Business

New Project: Seasonal Surveys of Sinclair Wetlands



Acoustic recorder placed overlooking main pond at Sinclair Wetlands, Dec 2014.

The Sinclair Wetlands Trust has asked Birds NZ to help with surveying the wetlands for the species present and also providing an idea of the numbers, both forest birds and waterfowl. This would provide a new baseline record of birdlife in the wetlands. The Trust is currently actively undertaking wetland restoration and re-planting of the islands with native trees and plants.

This project was discussed at the February Indoor Meeting and there was a good deal of support for undertaking this survey. Our suggestion is to do the survey every season (January, April, July and October) in the first instance and then perhaps repeat it for several years to get a good baseline.

Our suggested methods are as follows: the waterfowl would be counted on the two main ponds from lookouts on Ram Island; the forest birds would be surveyed by 5 minute counts very 100 metres on a circuit around Ram

Island and the fernbirds counted along the main tracks using response to playback of calls. We could also again put out the automatic digital recorders in spring to 'listen' for bitterns and perhaps also pick up marsh crake calls.

So this survey should appeal to a variety of interests; the surveys would involve at least 6 people each time (hopefully travel costs will be reimbursed). I would love to hear from someone who might like to be an overall coordinator of the project, someone who could plan the survey days and keep a record of the data collected.

First Trial Survey: It is planned to do a trial survey to test out the methods before starting the actual survey. We want to do this before the shooting season, so we will have a field trip to the Sinclair Wetlands on Sunday morning, 19th April. If you are interested please contact Mary Thompson 464 0787 maryt@actrix.co.nz for more information and to organize car-pooling.

NZ Bird Conference & AGM, Blenheim, Saturday 30 May to Monday 1 June 2015 “The People and the Birds”

This will be a special conference as it is celebrating the 75th anniversary of the founding of OSNZ. This conference will not only look at our unique birds, but also at the people, projects, activities and history of the Society and its members, and then take a peek at our future direction. There will be field trips on the Monday. This should be a fantastic weekend to mark this historical occasion! And as it is being held in Blenheim it makes it easier to get to. Several of us will be attending so others should plan to attend too. Registration is Online at the Birds NZ website.

Birds New Zealand (OSNZ) Subscriptions 2015

A reminder that the annual membership subscriptions were due 1 January 2015. This is all too easy to overlook this during the Christmas New Year period. There are 18 of us who haven't paid yet. You can renew subs online. I'm afraid the Grace period will expire soon. Thanks. Mary Thompson, Regional Representative.

Programme 2015

Monthly Indoor Meetings will be held at 7.30pm in the Benham Seminar Room, Benham Building, Department of Zoology, 340 Great King Street.

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| Wed March 25 | Peter Langlands Update on research on godwits and other birds |
| Sunday April 19 | Field trip to Sinclair Wetlands, car-pooling from Dunedin at 10 am. We will survey waterfowl, bush birds and fernbirds. Contact Mary Thompson 464 0787, maryt@actrix.co.nz for more information. |
| Wed April 22 | Janet Ledingham Birds of Shetland and the Farne Islands |
| Wed May 27 | Neil Roberston Birds of Ecuador |
| Wed June 24 | Wray Grimaldi Disease in Adelie Penguins |
| Sunday June 28 | Winter Wader Count, High tide at 12.15 pm at 1.9 m. We are keen for more people to be involved, so please contact Peter Schweigman peter.schweigman@xtra.co.nz . |
| Wed July 23 | Hamish Spencer Classification of the World's Cormorants and Shags |
| Wed Aug 26 | Kelvin Lloyd Update on the Beyond Orokonui project. |

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Many thanks to all who contributed.

Final date for contributions to next newsletter: April 16.