



# THE ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND



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## **Black-fronted Tern – Upper Manuherikia Valley**



The Upper Manuherikia is a small braided river running 12km down from the gorge into Falls Dam some 10km east of St Bathans in Central Otago. The valley has been identified as an outstanding natural landscape in the Central Otago District Plan and is the area in which Graham Sydney painted some of his most famous landscapes.

At the end of last year John Douglas from Alexandra found a small Black-fronted Tern nesting colony just below the washed out upper Manuherikia Bridge. On 2 January he was dive bombed by terns on an island just below the bridge and found four “nests” containing eggs – two with two eggs, and two with one egg, but no chicks. Surprising he thought as “Black-fronted terns nest from September to January and with eggs still yet to hatch you would expect to come across chicks that would have hatched earlier.”



By the 9 January the eggs were still to hatch but further downstream both adult and junior terns were seen. Returning home via Home Hills Run Road and Falls Dam he saw Paradise ducks with chicks, several Pied stilts, including one doing a broken wing act and a very pale coloured Banded dotterel, while every now and then a Black-billed gull flew over.

It rained on January 12 and 13 and the Manuherikia normal river flow of about 5 cumecs increased to peak at 70 cumecs, not that high compared with the record flow of 600 cumecs in 1995, but high enough to warrant a check of the nesting terns.

On 14th the river was flowing fast and, at the ford, looked twice its normal height. The terns were still there along with some Black-billed gulls, but numbers were down. Some of the Terns were flying past with lizards in their bills but none of their young chicks could be seen. Four days later the river was low enough to walk back onto the island. The four “nests” with eggs were still there, still yet to hatch and downstream were other adults and what looked like two to three month old chicks along with a number of Black-billed gulls.

By the 24th the single eggs had still not hatched but there was a chick of a few days old, well camouflaged in amongst the water worn river stones, a

three to four-week chick calling to be fed and up amongst the low growing vegetation what looked like a week old chick.

January 26 and 27 January, the height of summer – 25C one day, snow the next. On the night of the 26 there was a cold snap that brought snow well down on the hills. By Friday morning snow was lying upto 10cm over parts of the Manuherikia and Ida Valleys and St Bathans. What would it be like at the tern-nesting site? Next day the snow had melted in the valley and there was no sign that any birds that had succumbed to the cold snap but there were still eggs about. Would they hatch?

The last visit was on February 5 when the handful of terns remaining appeared to be the final two pairs nesting or feeding newborn chicks. An adult tern landed nearby and after a good few minutes a young chick emerged into view from the stones followed by a second one. Both made their way down towards the edge of the water where the adult tern returned with what looked like a small worm and the two hungry chicks let “mother” know how hungry they were.

Over five weeks John took hundreds of images using a Canon SLR Model EOS 550D on sport setting and an EFS 55-250mm zoom lens.

At the moment cattle graze the unfenced river and wander through the tern colonies and the nesting sites of Banded Dotterel, Pied Oystercatcher and Black-billed Gull. But they are also under threat by a proposed lignite mining operation. Although it is recognised as an outstanding natural landscape, the valley floor was excluded from the 68,000ha Oteake Conservation Park as a result of intervention by the Minister of Conservation with pressure from the Minister of Energy. Solid Energy has a current mining licences covering 3000ha at Home Hills and L&M Group has exploration permits for 20,000ha near Hawkdun. Mining would mean a large-scale open cast operation with a conversion plant likely requiring a 70ha site.

The Central Lakes Forest & Bird Branch has scheduled a field trip to this tern-colony site in January 2113. Maybe an earlier OSNZ visit might be of interest?

**John Douglas**



## Meanwhile over in Aussie

New and expanded coal mines proposed in the Boggabri area will destroy 5,000 hectares of bushland which is habitat for 21 threatened bird species, including the Barking Owl, Hooded Robin and Grey-crowned Babbler.

84 year old birdwatcher Russ Watts has had enough and has chained himself to the gates of a coal mine near Narrabri in NSW, blocking a coal haulage road used by the Boggabri Coal.

So you older members of the OSNZ, when your legs start telling you that chasing Saddlebacks up the steep sides of the Orokoni Sanctuary is getting a little too strenuous, there will still be a role for you up the lignite mines in Central Otago and you can sit down and relax with a cup of tea or a beer while taking part.

## Ornithological Snippets

Alan Baker saw a **Falcon** flying past his home in Roslyn at 9 a.m. on 11 August and after an absence of almost 2 months a bird was heard calling in Waitati on 21 September.

Doreen Grant reports seeing unusual **Blackbird** behaviour in her back yard in Outram. One male **Blackbird** routinely picked up leaves in its bill during pursuit and chasing of another male in her garden. I see that this behaviour was reported in Notornis back in 1952. "No. 1 picked up a beech leaf, scooped several more up, and with head lowered, charged No. 2." Have others seen this behaviour?

Richard Schofield reports there was still a single **Cattle Egret** at Clydevale on 29 July and there was another in a less usual site at Tokoiti, near Milton, late afternoon on 8th August.

At 8.30pm on 16 August, Bob Cunninghame heard a **Morepork** calling out in thick fog on Signal Hill; the call coming from the direction and distance of the concrete water tank below and west of the lookout. The first he has heard this year.

On 2 September Lala Frazer sighted a **Silvereye** at her syrup feeder with a very large reddish pink swollen area at the corner of its beak, similar to the lesions seen a few years ago that was followed by a collapse in numbers. She immediately removed both syrup feeders. As yet no others with such areas of swelling have been sighted.



She says that the **Bellbirds** - for whose benefit the feeders were still out in an attempt to aid their breeding success - have not been to the feeder for at least three days with the number of kowhai in bloom, although they are certainly in evidence through their song.

No such reticence was shown at the Orokonui Sanctuary – left.

And almost entirely due to the editor's email ineptitude, a few late reports from Maree Johnstone:-

Small flocks of **Brown Creeper** (5 - 10 birds) were seen/heard daily for approx.

2 weeks at the end of May/ beginning of June, in the Town Belt opposite my home at 75 Sligo Tce, Roslyn.

The number of **Tui** in the neighbourhood is increasing by the day. Numbers have risen from the resident pair to 14 on 19 June including 2 of Murray's banded birds.

A couple of interesting sightings in February (I know I should have reported them months back but they are on Ebird!):

a lone **Coot** swimming up the Water of Leith behind the Stadium and a **Kingfisher** on the telegraph wire above my bird table observing the feeding frenzy below. Many **Silvereyes** and a few **Blackbirds** were dining on over-ripe fruit.

There have been no reports of returning **Bar-tailed Godwits** in Otago by 20 September. Late winter counts included this report by Jim Fyfe with photo by John Burke:-

This flock of godwits were at Allan's Beach (spit end) on 17 August. John Burke was out there and took a photo for the count (I got about 148 and John got 143) - our estimates by eye on the beach were much lower!



Elsewhere there were 182 at Aramoana on 14 September, none at Blueskin Bay on 29 August and a mere 32 there on 19 September.

The National **Royal Spoonbill** Count results have yet to be released by the powers that be but inside sources have revealed that the New Zealand total is well in excess of the 4 seen in Otago: 1 at Karitane, 1 at the Catlins and 2 in the harbour, the latter first coming to light when Bruce McKinlay ducked into Restaurant 87 for a well earned drink after scouring the peninsula for spoonbills. Just seen a couple of those said the proprietor after Bruce related his sorry tale.

Out at sea Alan Anderson had a white phase **Southern Giant Petrel** follow his fishing boat in August while Graeme's Green Flash Seabird Tour on 18<sup>th</sup> of the month was a little quieter than usual but his September 4 trip included **Fairy Prions, Grey and White-chinned Petrels** – there have not been many of the latter around this winter.



The more interesting Mollymawks included this immature “**cauta**” (left) and a dark looking **Buller's** (below left) that could just possibly be the Chatham Island subspecies?



## Notices and Business

### Graeme's Titi Welcome Seabird Tour

Saturday 6 October 2012 8.00 am

Backup Day Sunday, if Saturday foul weather.



The 'Caprice' catamaran of Allan Anderson is booked for an ocean seabird cruise. Start at Weller's Rock 8:00 am.

Objective; See the arriving stream of titi (sooty shearwaters) one of the great migrations on earth, then cruise out towards the seabird rich ocean mixing zone at the continental shelf edge for 5-6 hours. Mollymawks are guaranteed to take an interest and I hope the prions will be out and about in numbers.

Shared cost of about \$100 each.

Weller's Rock Jetty is the one the Monarch uses, just before the Harrington Point settlement.

if you are keen Email Graeme Loh at [gloh@earthlight.co.nz](mailto:gloh@earthlight.co.nz) or txt 0211322436

## Programme 2012

Monthly Indoor Meetings will be held in the Benham Seminar Room, Benham Building, Department of Zoology, 340 Great King Street at 8 p.m.

- Wed 26 September    Indoor Meeting Kerry Weston  
Rock Wren
- Sat 6 October        Titi Welcome Seabird Tour – see ad above.  
Contact Graeme Loh
- Sat 13 October      Hawksbury Lagoon. Meet Stewart Street 10.30am.  
Contact Derek Onley 4822831 email below
- Wed 24 October     Indoor Meeting Craig McKenzie  
Photographing Birds
- Wed 28 November   Indoor Meeting Sue Odlin  
Bird encounters in UK and Japan.

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Many thanks to all who contributed.  
Final date for copy for next newsletter 17 October