

ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND (INC.)

WANGANUI BRANCH



Birding Wanganui

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Newsletter – August 2010

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Photograph by Lynne Douglas

Foraging finch flocks

Each winter, species such as House Sparrow, Goldfinch, Yellowhammer, Greenfinch and Redpoll gather in flocks that forage widely on the seeds of herbaceous plants, both on the ground and still attached to plants. For example, fields infested with thistle regularly attract large numbers of Goldfinch. In this species, these flocks are more than just temporary aggregations of birds around a localised seed source but seem to be longer lasting.

Within such flocks, the birds appearing to behave in an organised fashion, foraging, feeding, and roosting together, and responding in a seemingly coordinated way to the appearance of a potential predator. In other species, the flocks are generally smaller and appear to be more transient. Yellowhammer and Greenfinch are examples, gathering at a localised seed source (see what happens when you spread seed on that bare patch on your lawn), but outside

that being much more loosely organised. Even in these species, however, birds seem to keep an eye on each other. If one bird finds a seed source, others quickly follow them down to it, with yet others following them as birds are recruited from a widening area.

Flocks of finches have been particularly prominent in Wanganui over the past few months. Lynne Douglas first reported seeing flocks of Goldfinch and House Sparrow feeding in the roadside gutters of certain city streets, mostly in aggregations of 20-30 birds, although one flock of 200 Goldfinch was noted. Lynne found that these birds were feeding on pohutukawa seeds. Pohutukawa are not natives of this region but have been planted extensively along many streets as an ornamental shade tree, to the benefit of the birds. In one of the flocks, Lynne photographed a number of Redpoll, a species that is not often recorded in Wanganui. Others soon started to find Redpoll, mostly from sites where there were seeding pohutukawa trees. Although Redpoll occur sporadically in the surrounding countryside, and are occasionally seen in the city — usually in association with silver birch — this is the first time that the species has been seen reasonably regularly within the Wanganui. Have we simply overlooked these birds previously, or are their numbers increasing? Is their local distribution changing and, if so, what is driving this?



Redpoll male *photograph by Ormond Torr*



Redpoll female *photograph by Ormond Torr*

In contrast to Goldfinch and Redpoll, flocks of Greenfinch and Yellowhammer appear to specialise more on grass seed, including that spread by the contractors vegetating the new stopbanks being built along the lower Whanganui R. Large numbers of Yellowhammer, smaller numbers of Greenfinch, and the ubiquitous House Sparrows removed a lot of seed before it could germinate. We do not know how much seed they ate, which may be just as well, given the contentiousness of this scheme. You can imagine the headline: “Regional Council feeds birds at ratepayers’ expense.” Of course, we do not know if the apparent increase in the number and size of these finch flocks is simply because we are now being more observant, or if the past breeding season was particularly productive or, again, if land-use changes are driving a gradual shift in the distribution of finch populations towards urban areas and surrounding lifestyle blocks. Large areas of farmland locally are ploughed at the end of summer and then reseeded with pasture grasses that seldom flower and set seed. Although, just like the recently-seeded stopbanks, there is a brief pulse in food for finches, this probably does not offset the loss of the lower but more sustained seed supply of rough pasture.

Of course, finches and sparrows are not the only birds that flock in winter. Large flocks of Starlings are also regularly seen, especially in the evening, when many hundreds of birds gather to roost. Over 700 birds were counted in one

flock photographed by Lynne (the photograph captured only part of the flock), and about 1800 in another photographed by Paul Gibson. These mass roosts may serve as locations where information about food sources is transferred, particularly ones that are variable or short-lived. The information is not transmitted in any deliberate way but through individuals that know of a food source, found on previous days, flying direct to the source when leaving the roost. Conversely, those birds that might have had difficulty finding food the previous day, sit around watching where birds that leave the roost in a purposeful way tend to go, then following them. If, on a particular day, a food source proves insufficient to support the birds that go to it, then they may become the followers the next day.

Peter Frost and Lynne Douglas

Fantails and flies

In an email circulate to some members in early August, Ormond Torr wrote "I spent some time on Sunday [8th August] at Gordon Park photographing two fantails that were feeding on a flock of midges, which are just visible in some of the shots. On reviewing the shots it was interesting to see what positions and attitudes the birds got into." The photos are worth sharing, not only because they provide a unique perspective on fantails, but also because they prompt some thoughts about the energetics of fantail-like behaviour.



Fantails catching flies, Gordon Park

photographs by Ormond Torr

One of the fascinating things about fantails and similar hyper-active species in other parts of the world is how they balance their energy needs. The birds would seem to expend considerable energy with their constant movement in pursuing such tiny morsels of foods. How do fantails balance the costs of foraging with what appear to be such meagre returns? Three possibilities: first, their foraging success may be higher than we think (i.e. they are successful with most sallies, even if prey size is tiny). Second, the energy content of these tiny insects, on a unit basis, may be higher than we imagine. Is this likely? Probably not. Third, the mode of flight may be less expensive than it seems. If you think of it, fantails intersperse periods of gliding and floating, during which energy expenditure is minimal, with brief bursts of explosive energy when they set off or turn sharply. Ormond's photographs show well the low aspect ratio of the birds (the aspect ratio is the square of the wingspan

divided by wing surface area). A rough calculation suggests that it is about 1.7, which is at the lower end of aspect ratios, typical of birds adapted to generating lift rapidly when taking-off. Wing loading (body mass divided by wing area) also seems to be low, less than 0.09 g/cm² (fantails weigh about 8 g, and wing area, calculated roughly from one of Ormond's photographs, is about 95 cm² for both wings combined). As the photographs also show, the birds' tails are long and often spread in flight, aiding manoeuvrability, but one wonders how much additional lift the tail provides.



Fantail about to ingest a midge
photograph by Ormond Torr

Finally, if one enlarges the first of the three photographs on the previous page, you will see that the bird is just about to catch a midge, which is just visible at the entrance to the beak's gape. Note the rictal bristles on either side of the bird's gape, which probably serve as a net, allowing the bird to capture insects over a larger area than the gape itself.

Peter Frost and Ormond Torr

Kingfishers hawking cicadas off sunlit walls?

Last summer, we watched a kingfisher on a number of occasions fly fast and direct up to a sunlit wall before doing a sharp 180° turn and flying off. We have also noticed that on fine days large black cicadas bask on the north-facing wall, and we wonder if the kingfisher was hawking the insects. The cicada species

concerned is probably the North Island Clay Bank Cicada *Notopsalta sericea*, which is known to rest on walls. Has anyone else seen anything similar?

Colin and Robyn Ogle

The story of Stumpy

This is the time of the year when Australian Magpies begin nesting. A pair in the vicinity of Mosston Road was already gathering nesting material in July. The pair at the Castlecliff Skate Park, which I call the beach birds, has remained together throughout autumn and winter. Until recently, they have had a chick from last year's brood in tow, as they have done in previous years. Once they began collecting nesting material, however, the chick has not been seen. It is not clear if it left on its own accord or if it was forced out. Meanwhile, collecting nest material so preoccupies the adults that they will often not even bother to come to the car park for food, even when they can see that I am there.

This urge to nest is apparent also in our captive magpie, Stumpy, so called because she lost a foot nine years ago, when she was young. We've had her since then. We have not cut her wings for years now, and she is free to come and go as she likes. She spends much of the day around the garden then comes inside at night. The awkwardness of having only one leg causes her to be off balance much of the time, with the result that her wing feathers are broken anyway. She often has no tail and no longer attempts to climb any of the trees, although she likes to perch on pieces of wood or any other high accessible point. The instinct to get well off the ground is particularly obvious in the evenings, when it starts to get dark.

Having only one leg, Stumpy certainly would not survive for long in the wild, as shown by the outcome of her interactions with other birds. When she first arrived, the garden was within the territory of the beach pair. Whenever

these birds came to the garden together, the female would attack Stumpy. This ended only when the female got injured elsewhere and stopped coming to the garden.

Despite having been in captivity for so long, Stumpy begins collecting nesting material in the garden each year in late winter. Usually, she carts it around and just drops it here and there. Quite often she will take it over to the gate and call to other birds in the area. This ritual has gone on for some years now, but it became more pronounced last year. A young male magpie, a chick of the beach pair, reared about four years ago, attempted then to mate with Stumpy, unsuccessfully as it turned out. This male then abandoned Stumpy and found another mate elsewhere. The male returned to the garden for food only when the pair had chicks. These visits eventually tailed off, however, until they became few and far between.



Stumpy, surrounded by fragments of nesting material calling to potential mates

Photograph by Lynne Douglas

In July this year, the male returned, visiting daily. Stumpy's nesting efforts went into overdrive, as she collected straw and other material, carting it over

to the gate. Then one day the male arrived with its mate, who promptly attacked Stumpy, beating her up. A few days after that, the male stopped coming, presumably because, like last year, the pair had started nesting somewhere else. Meanwhile, Stumpy continued to collect straw and any other suitable material. One morning in early August, when I went to let Stumpy outside, I found that she had shredded an old piece of carpet and had carried the yarn on to the window sill where she normally sits when inside. Even though she has been in captivity for many years, her mating instincts are clearly still strong.

Lynne Douglas



Stumpy's "Busy Building Business"

Photographs by Lynne Douglas

Where have the Cattle Egrets gone?

Cattle Egrets are winter visitors to New Zealand from Australia, and were first reliably reported in the country in 1963. Since at least 1984, a flock of Cattle Egrets has been recorded on a dairy farm along the Whangaehu Beach Rd every year except 1985, 1991, 1994-96, and 2002-06, when there were no reported sightings (but not necessarily no Cattle Egrets). Ignoring these years, the maximum number recorded annually between 1984 and 2001 averaged 23 birds, ranging from 40 in 1999 to 10 in 2001.

In 2007, stimulated by a report from Phil Battley of Cattle Egrets at their usual site along Whangaehu Beach Rd, we began keeping a track of their numbers there. The maximum numbers recorded in each of the following years were 5 (2007), 8 (2008), and 16 (2009). This year, however, we have recorded no overwintering birds. The only birds seen were a single bird on 8th May, and 3 on 2nd June. These seem to have been transients, as they did not stay around.

What has happened? Numbers at breeding colonies in southern Australia, and breeding success at these colonies, have been declining. Does this account for both the reduction in numbers since their peak in the late 1990s and the current failure of birds to return this year, or has the Whangaehu flock perished at sea either on the way back in late 2009 or during their return in 2010? If the whole flock perished, has the equivalent of their 'institutional memory' perished as well? Will a new generation of birds return to Whangaehu in future years? Only time will tell. We continue to monitor the area.

Peter Frost and Paul Gibson



Cattle Egrets, Whangaehu Beach Rd, 2009

Photographs by Paul Gibson

New book on New Zealand birds



Paul Gibson has done it again. The well-known Wanganui bird photographer and strong supporter of Birding Wanganui has produced his second book on New Zealand birds. His first book, *New Zealand Birds - a diverse selection*, was published in 2007 and proved to be an instant success, selling out within a year or so of publication. That book, written and profusely illustrated with Paul's attractive photographs, covered 110 of about 320 bird species recorded in New Zealand. This new book, *Birds New Zealand - a beautiful collection*, covers 160 species, including a number of species found only on New Zealand's sub-Antarctic islands, and some extinct species on display as specimens in the Whanganui Regional Museum. Like the first book, this one has an introductory section covering various facets of bird biology and associated topics: flight, feathers, flocking, senses, feet, bills, naming the parts, colour aberrations, interesting facts, migratory birds, Maori & birds, extinct birds, bird parks & aviaries, bird rescue, conservation, and museum collections. All of this helps to increase the reader's understanding of the wide diversity of form and function in birds, and some of the many ways people interact with them.

The book is divided into various sections: bush & mountain; town & country; ocean, shore & estuary; river & wetland; and birding locations. Each page is richly illustrated with Paul's stunning photographs as well as being laid out in an innovative way in A4

landscape format. Most species are allocated one, sometimes two, pages of text and photographs. The text provides brief facts about each species (e.g. alternative names, size and weight, status, range, habitat, food, voice, breeding, and general notes), as well as a personal account of a close encounter Paul had with the species.

Paul not only wrote and took all the photographs in the book, but he also designed and set the layout, and published it. The only thing that he did not do was print and bind it, although even there he deserves credit for selecting a printer who could produce such high quality work. The book is available publicly in a soft cover version, retailing at most major book stores at \$49.95, the same price as his previous book. Congratulations on a fine book. Its title says it all.

Paul Gibson, 2010. *Birds New Zealand – a beautiful collection*. Unique Pictorials, Whanganui, New Zealand. 200 pages. ISBN 978-0-473-16630-4.

Peter Frost

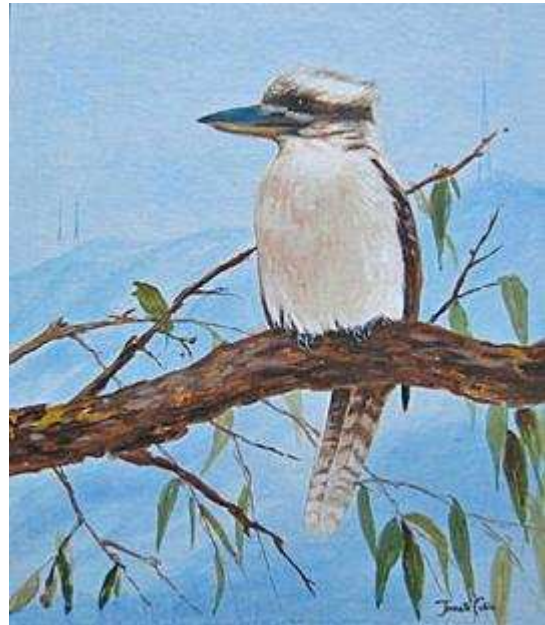
Profile: Jeanette Cutten – local bird artist

There is a lot of talent in Wanganui, not only in those who photograph birds, but also among people who draw and paint. Jeanette Cutten is one of the latter. Daughter of nationally known artist, Len Cutten, Jeanette trained as an artist with her father and at the Wellington Technical College. She became a highly successful commercial artist and fashion designer, working mainly in Wellington.

As a mature artist, her real passion is painting wildlife in watercolour, specialising on birds. She has painted many species in New Zealand and Australia, where she has received commissions from as far afield as Perth and Melbourne. Jeanette willingly accepts commissions from anyone wanting a picture painted, either for

yourself or as birthday, anniversary, or wedding present. If you'd like a picture painted, contact Jeannette by email (jcutten@xtra.co.nz), naming the species or sending your favourite photograph to be illustrated, and giving the required dimensions of the finished product.

Here are some examples of her work.



Kookaburra *Painting by Jeanette Cutten*



Morepork *Painting by Jeanette Cutten*

Recent reports

The following sightings cover the period April–August 2010. They exclude ones reported elsewhere in this newsletter. Where initials are used to identify the observers, they refer to the following: Keith Beautrais (KB); Ian Bell (IB); Jim Campbell (JC); Lynne Douglas (LD); Peter Frost (PF); Sue Frost (SF); Paul Gibson (PG); Bill Greenwood (WG); Dawne Morton (DM); Colin and Robyn Ogle (CRO, CO, and RO); Bevin Shaw (BS); Laurel Stowell (LS); Phil Thomsen (PT); and Ormond Torr (OT).

New Zealand Dabchick: single birds seen on the Whanganui R (or one bird seen a number of times on separate occasions at different localities) — opposite Pitzac's, 9/05 and 24/06 (MO); opposite Kowhai Park, 31/05 (PF); below Georgetti Drive, 13/07 (PF) and 20/07 (RO). Nesting Bason Botanic Garden, 22/08 (PG).

Pied Shag: 1, Whanganui R at Kowhai Park, 13/07 (PF).

Little Black Shag: 3 seen diving together repeatedly by the City Bridge, Wanganui, 24/05 (CRO); 1 recorded occasionally on Whanganui estuary, all months May-August (PF).

Spotted Shag: present throughout period late June-end August, roosting on Te Anau wreck and usually foraging offshore (PF), occasionally upstream as far as Affco-Imlay (OT, PF); maximum numbers – 11 on 28/07 and 10 on 15/08 (PF).

Australasian Bittern: a pair at Hawken Lagoon, true right bank of Waitotora R near the mouth; seen most days in the week beginning 9/08 (JC).

Nankeen Night-heron: birds counted leaving the Kaurapaoa Stream roost at dusk — 11, 14/04 (PF); 13, 22/05 (PF); at least 4, 26/07 (Phil Battley, Jesse Conklin, PF).

Royal Spoonbill: present more-or-less throughout the period April–August, in small numbers (5-10 birds), on the old

jetty at Affco-Imlay, Whanganui R; maximum number recorded was 36 on 8/04, apparently on migration as they moved off towards Taranaki. A flock of 43 birds recorded a few days earlier on the Whangaehu R estuary, including two colour-banded birds, 0-31319 YL/R Y banded as a chick by Mike Bell on 4/11/05 at the Blenheim sewage ponds, and 0-31620 RB/R Y, banded as a chick by Peter Schweigman on 5/1/01 at Green Island, Otago (OT).

Black Swan: 64, Koitiata Lagoon, 4/07 (PF).

Canada Goose: 34, Koitiata Lagoon, 4/07 (PF).

Cape Barren Goose: one free-flying bird reported from Mowhanau township by Ken Owen and John Carson, 12/08 (PT); same bird seen at same locality in subsequent weeks by other observers (PF, PG, OT).

New Zealand Falcon: 1, James McGregor Memorial Park, 14/04 (SF); 2, Bastia Hill, 16/04 (PF); 1 juvenile female with a broken wing rescued near Raetihi, 21/04 (DM); 1 male, Bushy Park, 05/05 (PF, CRO, CD); 1 immature, central Wanganui (Korrin Black and KB); 1, Castlecliff, 9/6 (WG); 2, Aramoho, 27/06 (LD). Also reported from Ohau Valley, Levin, by Joan Leckie, 23/06; this bird was eating a fantail.

Spotless Crake: at least 5 separate birds heard and seen, Morikau Station, Ranana, 19/05 (PF).

Black x Pied Stilt: 1, Koitiata Lagoon, 4/07 (PF). This may be the same bird as that recorded and photographed in the previous two years at the same locality.

Pied Oystercatcher: relatively few records — 1 bird flying high, east over Wanganui on 29/05 (PF); 3 on Whanganui R estuary, 27/04 (LD); 3-5 on Wanganui airport, early May (BS); 4 at Wanganui airport, 12/05 (PF); 5, Wanganui airport 21/05 (BS); 1 on estuary, 15/08, and at Wanganui airport, 19/08 (PF).

Banded Dotterel: 71-79 birds present at Wanganui airport on successive days in early May (BS); 85, Wanganui airport, 12/05 (PF); at least one pair nesting, 3 eggs, Wanganui airport, 19/08 (PG, PF); 4 adults in breeding plumage, Whanganui estuary, 23/08 (PF).

Red-billed Gull: further sightings on the Whanganui estuary of colour-banded gulls from Kaikoura – WM/YRY (28/05, PF), MK/RKK (16/05, 7/06 and 26/6, LD), MY/YGK (26/6, LD; 10/07, LD and PF), BM-KWG (10/07, LD), MY/RWY (14/06, PG); large flock of 740 birds at Beach Rd, 3/07 (OT).

Black-billed Gull: 1, Whanganui R at Kowhai Park, 7/07 (PF); 1, Whanganui R at Taupo Quay, 31/07 (PF).

Caspian Tern: numbers on the estuary much lower than in previous years; maximum 15 at the Beach Rd roost on 12/05 (PF). Fifteen birds feeding off the Whanganui R mouth on 28/05/10, strung out along the interface between the muddy outflow from the river and the cleaner seawater.

Two venerable old ladies

These two Red-billed Gulls have been recorded on the Whanganui R for at least the past two years. Female MY/YGK was banded as a chick at Kaikoura by Dr Jim Mills on 25/11/80, which means that she was over 29 years and 7 months old when last seen. Female MK/RKK was also banded at Kaikoura as a chick by Dr Mills and his team, on 13/11/85, making her over 24 years and 7 months old when last seen.



Photographs by Peter Frost

About the Ornithological Society of New Zealand (OSNZ)

"Fostering the Study, Knowledge and Enjoyment of Birds"

The OSNZ was founded in 1939, and became an incorporated society in 1953. It currently has just over 1200 paying members world-wide, ranging from professional ornithologists and government institutions in New Zealand and overseas, through experienced amateur observers and students at secondary and tertiary educational institutions, to newcomers wanting to increase their knowledge of birds. No special qualifications are required for admission and membership is open to anyone interested in birds. Details and application forms are available on the Society's website at <http://osnz.org.nz/join.htm> or from the Membership Secretary, Yvonne Mackenzie, PO Box 29-532 Fendalton, Christchurch 8540, NZ (email: yvonnemackenzie@hotmail.com).

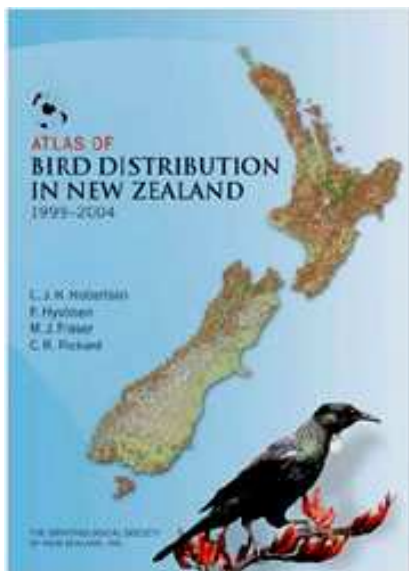
Members are entitled to:

- Participate in all activities and meetings of the Society
- Receive all free publications (including the scientific journal **Notornis**, and the general interest magazine **Southern Bird**, both 4 times per year), and have access to the library and records of the Society
- Vote in elections to appoint Officers of the Society

Membership fees (effective 1st January 2011) are:

Ordinary Member	NZ \$70
Full-time Student Member	NZ \$35
Family member *	NZ \$17.50
Institution/Group member	NZ \$140
Corporate Member	NZ \$350
Life Member (40 years and over)	NZ \$1,380

* A Family Member is someone living in a household with an Ordinary Member, Life Member, or a Fellow (appointed), and does not receive the Society's publications



Birding Wanganui is the local branch of the OSNZ, but is open to anyone living in and around Wanganui who is interested in birds and birding. Membership of the group is free. Members share information on a regular basis. Evening meetings (talks, slide shows) are held on the last Monday of each month at St Joseph's Hall, adjacent to St Mary's Catholic Church, 1 Campbell Street. Field trips are arranged periodically. For further details contact Peter Frost 06 343 1638 or 021 103 7730 (email: birds.wanganui@xtra.co.nz).

If you are not a member of the Ornithological Society of New Zealand (OSNZ), the parent body of our local branch, why not join? You can get further details from me or from the web at <http://www.osnz.org.nz/join.htm>.

As an incentive, the Society is still giving new members a free copy of the Atlas of Bird

Distribution in New Zealand 1999-2004 (worth \$98

if you bought it from the Society). This offer holds only while stocks last, so join now and get your copy. Of course, we hope that once you have joined and got your free copy of the Atlas you will stay on as a member and become involved in the various activities of the Society.