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Birds New Zealand

Otago Region Newsletter 5/2016 May 2016

Lagoon bird watching in Wild Dunedin



A white heron at Tomahawk Lagoon was the star attraction for twelve visitors to a Birds New Zealand event in the Wild Dunedin festival on 24 April 2016.

Starting early from an empty car park, four of us checked who was wading, swimming, diving, flying, eating, calling, sleeping, and standing around. Encouraged by seeing most of those behaviours entirely from birds, even after a full moon over everyone, we got busy.

New birders kept us busy over two hours of watching and enquiring. Bird watchers ranged from nine years old to retired couples, and focus adjustments on our three telescopes and shared binoculars soon warmed up. The diversity of watchers caused frequent height adjustments for scope tripods and ornithologists' legs.

The white heron stalked nearby shallows, with intent pauses before stabbing down at prey. Most times it got a fish, thrilling people watching through scopes, as the heron's dagger bill held the struggling fish flicking water droplets around before gulping it down. Watchers' reactions varied from wordless sudden gasps of excitement for the heron and shock at the fishes' sudden end, to exclamations of: "Oh ! it got one ! it got a fish ! Hey, see that ...!" Prey fish were native bullies, *Gobiomorphus*. Bullies, common in the lagoon, are also eaten by kingfishers and shags; and by trout, perch and eels. Sympathy for the fish flapping with its chubby belly, splayed fins, and gasping jaw in those final seconds in the heron's bill is balanced by considering both animals' niches. Bullies are ambush predators of crustaceans, insect larvae, and other fish. The white heron, still present now, is smaller than usual, and may be Australian. Then the white heron flew to the central sandbank, and outlet creek where it preened and stared at us. Four white - faced herons gave opportunities to compare and discuss the two species.

Ducks inspired lots of questions. Apart from mallards, and a few grey teal, there were more than 20 paradise shelducks near the outlet. For the youngest observer turning a scope, it quickly went from "big brown bird" to "male paradise shelduck," and on to note females have white heads. The paradise shelducks watched us, and they stayed by the farther away bank, until horses galloped around the field. A female shelduck called alarm and flew, fleeing thudding hooves and vibration, and all called different female and male alarms, and flew up and circled around to return giving aerial views. Birds' survival depends on moments like that paradise shelduck being the one feeling something is happening, and she tells everyone to go now. Paradise shelducks also like the valley above upper

lagoon, where a week earlier a dark harrier hawk killed a female shelduck. In a wild duck's world, there are no false alarms.

Shoveler ducks stayed too far away, silhouettes with low floating profiles. A harrier hawk swooped over them, causing all 25 shovelers to take off in their low fast flight, and land close for us to point out features, including their unique shuffle calls.

Four variable oystercatchers flew in and landed on the sandbar: joining pied stilts, spur winged plovers, red billed gulls, and black back gulls. Five starlings splashed down and energetically bathed, so were counted as water birds. A black shag, the largest shag, flew in from the sea and out to the dead tree where it perched near little shags, well named as they are the smallest shags.

Most popular birds were the stalking white heron, compared to shy white faced herons; and screeching pukeko, nervous paradise shelducks, quiet grey teal, and loud mallards. While we concentrated on the white heron and water birds, and lots of talking, 33 bird species were present over the two hours.

If our observation point was a bird survey station, all seen and heard species were: 1 black shag; 20 + little shags; 1 white heron; 4 white faced herons; 300 + black swans; 30 paradise shelducks (plus many more distant); 25 + mallard ducks; 25 + shoveler ducks; 6 grey teal (probably more); 4 pukeko; 5 variable oystercatchers; 10 spur winged plovers; 12 pied stilts - including one showing plumage of a hybrid with black stilt; black back gulls; red billed gulls; a few welcome swallows; starlings; 3 harrier hawks; 20 + rock pigeons flew over and in the horse field; silvereye; grey warbler; blackbird; song thrush; dunnock; skylark (distant farm); tui (calls from macrocarpas behind horse field); bellbird; house sparrow; chaffinch; redpoll; goldfinch; yellowhammer (a bit distant in long grass); and magpie far away over farmland.

Numbers are loose estimates, as we were more busy pointing and talking than surveying. A royal spoonbill seen the day before was absent, and no kingfisher although lately it is more likely at dusk. There were no Canada geese, their absence during daylight being usual for years now, although

flocks of four to nine geese fly over very low on a few Autumn nights, sometimes staying over at upper lagoon, and are gone before dawn.

Thanks to Bruce McKinlay for his scope, which reveals birds far away and near, and it even allows identifying fish caught by a white heron. Thanks also to Mary Thompson who brought another scope and did a more accurate water birds count; to Maree Johnstone for being the calm guide and I sent her the woman who asked "where are all those spoonbills flying up the harbour going...; and Derek Onley for bringing his scope and detailing the finer points of ducks and others. **Andrew Austin**

Last month's **Identification problem** was a heron seen at Tomahawk Lagoon and photographed by Bruce Chathro.



The problem with this bird or at least the photo, is that the black gape line does not appear to reach behind the eye as it does in White Heron suggesting it is an Intermediate Egret.... or Plumed Egret if you follow the latest checklist. Add in the fact that it appears to have paler tibia, was reported to look a bit small and still had a fair number of plumes - White Herons should have lost them by mid April - and you might think it worth

a trip to Tomahawk Lagoon. To check out the ID features of course for future reference. Not just to tick it off, add it to your ebird list and leap yet a few more steps up the top ebird list for NZ. So several birders did get to check it out during the Wild Dunedin festival -see above. All agreed it was a White Heron, albeit a smallish one. The gape extended behind the eye, the legs looked pretty well dark all the way up and for those who subscribe to the two bird theory, the state of the plumes suggested there was only one bird involved.

I knew that this newsletter occasionally reached as far north as Auckland but was not aware that its fame had spread as far north as Cairns so was pleased to get this email from Alan Anderson.

Just read your Otago newsletter. What excellent memories it brings! Now in my retirement years and having stopped running around like a blue-arsed fly I should time my next family visit to NZ to include one of your outdoor walks or indoor meetings, or both.

Our little club here in Cairns, Qld, now over 20 years old, is still thriving. I have attached one of our weekly newsletters for your perusal. Not as good as yours though.

The relevance of this, other than giving us all an opportunity to congratulate ourselves on our wide readership, is that Alan added a P.S.



Your quiz answer is Great Egret - gape-line past the eye, neck alone longer than the body (even though it is in a deep "S"), but I guess you don't get Intermediates there anyway. We had two of each on our walk around Centenary Lakes this morning (16 people, 49 spp) and with each one we all look very carefully. Our club walks are on eBird under "Cairns Birders" as we call ourselves now.

And their newsletter included a photo of an Intermediate Egret.

Derek Onley

Ornithological snippets

A moulting **Snares crested penguin** was seen and photographed at Jack's Bay, Catlins on 2nd April by Rob Mills. Tom Waterhouse found 12 **pieb shags** at Kakanui River bridge on 7th April, with 7 there on 29th. Meanwhile Derek Onley reported 3 from Doctor's Point on 7th May.

The Tomahawk Lagoon **white heron** was present again, first seen 19th April and with great views on April 24th at the Lagoon Lookabout that Birds NZ held as part of the Wild Dunedin Festival (Mary Thompson). Marion Rutherford found another at Taieri Mouth wetlands on 26th April. There have been a few scattered reports of **cattle egrets**, with 1 seen by Dave and Janet York at Titri Road near Waihola around 23rd April, 6 at Quoin Point, near Taieri Mouth, 27th April (Marion Rutherford), and 8 on Inchclutha and 1 at Kaitangata on 30th April (Richard Schofield).



A **reef heron** at Aramoana sand spit was first seen 9th Feb by Janet Ledingham and fairly regularly since then. Mary Thompson visited the spit just before low tide on 1st May and had great viewing of it stalking for prey in

the shallow outgoing pools, looking just like a stealth bomber.

A late report is of 2 **weka** on Mou Waho (Lake Wanaka), seen by visiting birdwatcher Robert Fallon 16th January. 18 **black-fronted terns** were seen on the Clutha River in Balclutha on 10th April by Suzanne Schofield, while Mary Thompson counted 314 at Aramoana on 1st May. Finally, Richard & Annie Schofield saw a **NZ falcon** over their garden in Balclutha on 28th April, accompanied by large numbers of local passerines.

This report includes records from Ebird and BirdingNZ, but more personal observations would be most appreciated. Please send any reports for the next summary to richard@pconnect.co.nz

Richard Schofield

Twisted bills, long tongues and a brown tui.



Mist netting tui in Wakari turned up this freak on 7th May. The upper bill is twisted strongly to the left, and the tongue is strangely elongated. Maria Aiau has reported visits by this bird, a male, to her feeder in Brockville in the last three years, but it had not previously been caught in Wakari. Just 2 weeks later it was back in Brockville, dominating other birds at Maria's feeder. Deformed bills seem quite common in tui and bellbirds, but this month's bird was the first in 385 tui banded since 2009. Amanda Keogh photographed another in Helensburgh in 2014. She judged it to be a female, and its tongue, although elongated, was much shorter.



Another unusual tui was reported by Graeme Jenkinson in Kaitangata on 18 May. This bird is leucistic – lacking much but not all of its usual feather pigmentation.

The bird was still around on 22 May. Leucistic tui have turned up from time to time in the North.

Murray Efford

Notices and Business

Reminders: Winter wader count Sunday 19 June 2016



High tide Dunedin 1507hr. Height 2.0
 Contact: peter.schweigman@xtra.co.nz

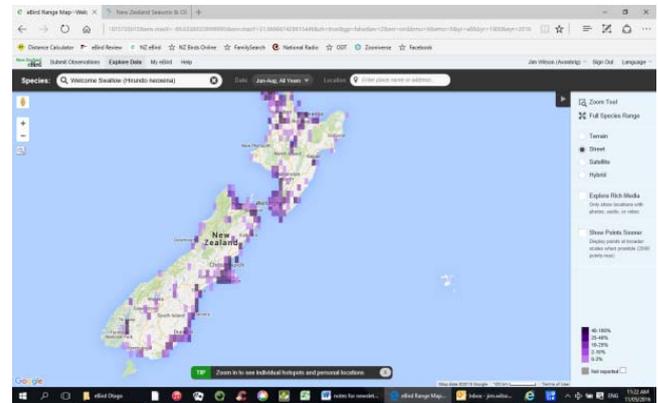
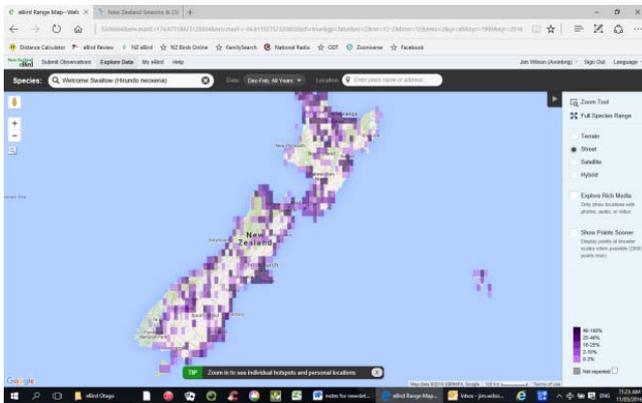
EBird Otago –

Recently I was talking to Mary Thompson about eBird and she drew my attention to a function that I had not really yet explored. If you are interested in migration here's how you can look at the species of interest. The steps are as follows; Log in to eBird, Select the "Explore Data" tab, Select the option "Species Maps" At the top of the page you will find fields you now need to complete.

- a. Set the "Location" field to the area you are interested in.
- b. Set the "Species" field to your species.
- c. Set the Month Range using either the pre-set options "Mar-May, Jun-Jul, Aug- Nov or Dec – Feb" or by selecting the months that interests you.
- d. Select the range of year/s from the pre-set option "This Year, Past 10 years or All Years" or by selecting the dates that interest you.
- e. Click on the "Set Date Range" tab.

You will then be presented with a map showing the distribution of your species over the time frame you have chosen. The two maps below show distribution for the Welcome Swallow based on “All Years” and for December to February and June to August. The increase in the intensity of the violet colour indicates higher frequency of observations of Welcome Swallow. The key is located at the bottom right of the page. TIP at the bottom right there is a tick box. If you un-tick this it will remove all the grey squares. These grey squares are when checklists have been submitted that do not include your selected species listed. This can be interesting but by un-ticking the box the migration patterns will become much clearer.

Welcome Swallow



December to February (all years)

June to August (All Years)

A warning, clearly the colder months do not give us prime birding weather and fewer checklists will have been submitted over these months. Take care as this could affect the apparent migration patterns.

Help With eBird, if you want talk about any aspect of eBird or need help with a specific issue please feel free to get in touch.
jim.wilson@actrix.co.nz

Finally a plea, when you are entering your checklists it would be great if you could use any existing Hot Spots as this makes reviewing the information much easier.

Jim Wilson

Programme 2016

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

- Wed May 25th** Neil Robertson
Birds of China and Tibet (plus fabulous videos)
- Sunday June 19th** Winter Wader Count. High tide Dunedin 1507 hrs. Height 2.0 Counters needed at Aramoana, Hoopers, Papanui. New counters very welcome.
Contact: peter.schweigman@xtra.co.nz
- Wed June 22nd** Susan Walker
A report on the state, trends and vulnerability of NZ's endemic birds.
- Sun Jun 25-Jul 3** NZ Garden Bird Survey
- Saturday July 16th** Sinclair Wetlands Winter Survey. Carpool leaving Dunedin at 9.00 am. Backup Sunday July 17th. To join the team, organize transport, and for more information contact Mary Thompson 464 0787, maryt@actrix.co.nz
- Sun July 10th** Bird watching Walks, Dunedin Botanic Garden, 1pm to 4pm; an event offered by us as part of the International Science Festival. If you can help with walks or look after the display in the Information Centre, please let Mary know: 464 0787.
- Wed July 27th** Craig McKenzie. "Birds through the lens."
- Wed August 24th** Chris L alas, Population trend in Otago shags – fluctuations or decline?

Newsletter editor: Derek Onley, derekonley@yahoo.com

Many thanks to all who contributed.

Final date for contributions to next newsletter: June 16.