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Birds New Zealand

Otago Region Newsletter 3/2017 March 2017

Four Species of Storm-Petrel



photo Matthias Dehling

Over the past 25 years or so, I have been fortunate enough to watch seabirds out off Taiaroa Head from the University of Otago's research vessels, first the RV Munida and, more recently, the RV Polaris II. The

best trips have invariably been those that go way offshore, leaving the coastal zone, moving across subtropical waters, to beyond the Subtropical Convergence, locally called the Southland Front, into subantarctic waters. In crossing these various ocean features, you can see a great variety of seabirds. Regular readers will be familiar with Graeme Loh's recent reports of his trips in this area.

Last month, Graeme was not able to go on the regular trip led by NIWA's Kim Currie, which went some 65km offshore. Instead, Matthias Dehling from the University of Canterbury and I were the birdwatchers. We saw an astounding number of species, but for me the highlight was seeing four species of Storm-Petrel in one day. I don't think there can be too many places in the world where such sightings would be possible.

The commonest species was one I had not seen before, the Black-bellied Storm-Petrel (title page above) which in the New Zealand area breeds on the Antipodes and Auckland Islands. In one of the ironies of bird naming, this species has a white belly, with just a thin black line along the centre (which is sometimes absent!). Large (as Storm-Petrels go) individual birds were commonest furthest from shore, but covered a fairly wide area. The next day, when I was lucky enough to go out again (although not so far), I saw just one bird within ~10 km from shore. They all flew with a fairly direct flight, just above the waves.



photos Matthias Dehling

Next in abundance was the Grey-backed Storm-Petrel, which in my experience is a regular once you get more than a few km out of Otago Harbour.

Slightly smaller than the previous species, grey on its back (as the name suggests) and without a contrasting white rump, this bird has a slower, more erratic flight, rapidly changing direction in what appears to be a haphazard manner.



photo Matthias Dehling

In the subtropical waters (which nevertheless are pretty cold to my way of thinking), there was a similar number of White-faced Storm-Petrels. These are real foot dangles, constantly getting their feet wet as they scamper around just over the sea surface. In the right light, you can clearly see the yellow webbing between their toes. This species, which is white underneath, is the one birdwatchers in northern New Zealand will probably know best. The photo above was taken in the Hauraki Gulf.



photo Matthias Dehling

Last, we spotted just two or three Wilson's Storm-Petrels, possibly the world's most widespread species. I had seen them previously off the Massachusetts and Carolina coasts, but never in New Zealand. To my eye most easily confused with the Black-bellied Storm-Petrel, it could be easily distinguished – once it angled itself properly – by its dark belly. Its slightly smaller size was also apparent.

So four species of rather special seabirds, all different in plumage but, most interesting to me, all most easily separated by their flying behaviour.

Hamish Spencer

Birders Survey Okia



Lala, Andrew, Jing, and Bruce. Photo by Mary

Five birders had a great day surveying Okia Reserve for Otago Peninsula Biodiversity Group on Saturday 25 February 2017. Our adventure began with four of us liaising at the Octopus Honeymoon Pool, also called Andersons Bay Inlet. In an anarchic state without our leader, we dawdled scanning the inlet but saw no octopus, so were unable to research how these armful beasts hold hands. There were no mermaids either, despite them preferring to avoid octopus parties because there are parking problems with the stingrays they ride on, but it was low tide so deeper water later allows better aquadynamics.

Mary got us on course, by introducing a new birder, Ying. Ying is so bright, cheerful, and organised that we became ultra alert. She carried her Field Guide to the Birds of New Zealand in her pack and hand all day, amazing dedication when the rest of us use the same space to pack in more

lunch. Ying sprang questions and field tests on us, with her Field Guide in hand, so we had to be on our game. You have to watch the new ones.

By now we were running late, so Ying volunteered as co-pilot, with Bruce showing his gift for fast near sea level flying and birding simultaneously. Mary and Andrew coped well as observers in back. After Portobello, we gained altitude over the hill to Papanui Inlet, risking detection by UFO radar and potential conscription into their research, but it was worth it. We landed a few times, looking at Paradise Shelducks, Spur-winged Plovers, Variable and Pied Oystercatchers, White-faced Herons and others.

At Okia walkway, our leader Lala waited. Mary donned her captain's hat with talisbird badges, so we were working now. Lala issued good field report sheets with clear instructions for two 1 km transects and a list of 38 species, which we swore to find in large numbers. She then looked after us by offering sun screen, so Bruce sloshed 0.3589 litre of it onto his tan darkened by fire fighting near Christchurch. He saw California Quail and a Pheasant there. New rules mean if you want a ride in a fire engine from the airport, you go to Rajasthan first. Ying asked if we would see Kokako, from joyful curiosity, with no hint of mercenary zeal for the \$5000 reward. Lala saw three Skylarks, so Bruce quickly filled a notebook with birds, followed by Mary more slowly because her handwriting is neat. Andrew was daydreaming and thinking about a story.

Counting began at 9.20am from Okia birdermobile port. Sky varied clear to partly cloudy, over a light southerly breeze through mild warmth, about 20 c. It was so calm, amid busy bird calls we heard thousands of crickets singing. We broke into sweats identifying and recording very active birds, at the same time passing Ying's field tests. In trees and grass we saw large numbers of Silvereyes, Goldfinches, Redpolls, Welcome Swallows, some Dunnocks, Chaffinches, Grey Warblers, and two Fantails. From SE to NE, scrubland with clearings had Paradise Shelducks, Spur-winged Plovers, Harrier Hawks, Pukeko, and many more finches and swallows. Bruce spotted a black cat, but we left it as we had forgotten to bring a dingo, and didn't chase it away ourselves because we needed our energy for the trek.

Lala led us on Riddell Rd 1 km Transect 1, along the track. An hour later, we started Okia 1 km Transect 2 at the Pyramids, a spectacular landscape of tipped basalt columns forged into peaks and cloaked in rich native

shrubs, with background views of more bush climbing toward cliffs. In 1980, Peter Johnson wrote a botany report detailing many plants, with a good map. Today, Andrew nearly deserted the official project to go off grid and bivouac overnight, to search for owls later, but stayed loyal because he needed a ride home. Many birds on the basalt Pyramids included great numbers of Goldfinches, Redpolls, Silvereyes, and Welcome Swallows. In an instant, we saw a flock of 20+ Welcome Swallows swooping over the Pyramids. There were Red and Yellow Admiral Butterflies, little bright red to orange butterflies, billions of tiny crickets, jumping spiders, dopey bumblebees, honey bees, and many fast scurries possibly indicating Copper Skinks. Apart from the cat earlier, we saw two hares and many rabbits.

We surveyed intensely, until Lala announced the end of Transect 2, and we walked toward the beach. Mary delighted in trying to entice silent hidden Fernbirds from rushes and bracken jungles with her RNZ recording and squeaker. At 11.39 am, Bruce heard a Fernbird, we heard quick “plick” calls coming from about 30m SE off the track, about half way between the Pyramids and the beach.

At warm Victory Beach we lunched on a dune with a view. Lala watched quietly over everything. Ying looked through binoculars; referred to her Field Guide for a pair of Variable Oystercatchers, Red-billed and Black-billed Gulls on the beach; smiled, and ate lunch all at the same time. We ate quietly, until some birders got competitive over who had bigger numbers. Mary asked Andrew to report, but he was unable to do maths before downing two cups of tea. Then his report was understated, because he still needed a ride home. Bruce recharged after only one cup of tea, declaring he saw a bird out to sea, identifying a Shy Mollymawk.

Each birder reported numbers to Lala. This ritual requires still wearing your binoculars, strapped diagonally left across the chest, for accuracy.

Reported for Riddell Rd – Transect 1: Fantail (2). Grey Warbler (6). Magpie (10). Paradise Shelduck (47+). Skylark (3). Tui (30). Blackbird (4). Black-backed Gull (1 low fly over, + more). Chaffinch (22). Dunnock (4). Goldfinch (162+). Greenfinch (4). Harrier Hawk (7). Pukeko (11). Redpoll (56+). Silvereye (46+). Song Thrush (4). Spur-winged Plover (11+). Starling (14+). Welcome Swallow (16+). Yellowhammer (3).

Reported for Okia–Transect 2: Bellbird (3). Fantail (2). Grey Warbler (4). Magpie (1). Tui (1). Blackbird (3). Black-backed Gull (5 low fly overs, + higher ones). Chaffinch (3). Dunnock (7). Goldfinch (48+). Greenfinch (3). Harrier Hawk (5). Redpoll (62+). Silvereve (56+). Song Thrush (2). Starling (56+). Welcome Swallow (30+). Yellowhammer (3).

Above are Andrew's counts, so maybe Lala reports numbers averaged from five individual counts. Numbers for more common species are underestimates. Finches, Silvereyes and Swallows are very common and highly active. After Transect 2, a flock of 200+ Starlings were on a grassy hillside clearing in bush below cliffs. Individuals' differences in numbers are covered by seven reasons: variations in observer chances; conversations; appalling handwriting; probable gaps to show Ying she's not the only one who gives field tests; genius birders doing the mean and standard error mentally before reporting; so our gentle readers enjoy their outrage calling out allegedly missed species; and mysteries of statistics.

Returning, Bruce again alerted us to Fernbird calls, "picks" coming from probably the same area as those earlier at 11.29am. Mary played RNZ bird calls to it, but we didn't see a Fernbird. We tried to decipher Lala's earlier instruction to detour at the Pyramids to look for Fernbirds. Lala knew very well what she told us, so she went sampling and photographing snow berries, re-appearing to tell us where to turn. Along a side track going east from the Pyramids, a Fernbird called, so Mary played calls to it, but we didn't see it. Scanning good Fernbird habitat, Mary spotted a small wilding pine tree in the midst of dense native scrub. Bruce called out two more. Ying wondered what the fuss was over. Andrew offered his Swiss Army knife with the wicked little saw, but couldn't start it because the pull cord was missing, and no one wanted to hand fell them.

On our return hike, SW gusts threw the first rain over us, a quick shower. Lala calmly said she saw a Fernbird at our last search site. Bruce and Andrew discussed methods for Okia group surveys. Assigning observers to different sides of the track, and making count stations every 200m were good ideas. At our birdermobile, Lala farewelled us.

We cruised back via Papanui and Hoopers Inlets. We saw Paradise Shelducks, Mallards, Variable Oystercatchers, Black Swans, Kingfishers

in immature and young adults plumage, Pied Stilts including one with two fledgling chicks, Spur-winged Plovers, White-faced Herons, Red-billed and Black-backed Gulls with young begging for food. Mary saw a Caspian Tern, so the swooping bird was followed, and it confirmed. A lone Royal Spoonbill stood a bit inland in cosy rushes and long grass. We wondered what it was doing there, it looked at us and yawned.

Over the hill to Portobello, we were so satisfied we forgot about climbing into UFO radar frequency again. They approve of us as fellow explorers anyway, and there are no records of birders live captured in their surveys. At Portobello, Bruce counted a few Variable Oystercatchers and Red-billed Gulls, another offering to eBird.

On the road home, we saw Little and Black Shags on boat sheds, keel slips, moored yachts, and trees, and diving. We passed animal behaviour fascinating and alarming. A wedding party, walking to a blue Chevrolet Impala. Responding to alarm calls, our pilot accelerated. Some of us are not banded. Clearly, more species than birds and octopus get frisky on Otago Peninsula. More research is needed.

We were back at Andersons Bay Inlet again. Still no carousing octopus, but two women watching the sports field may be mermaids on shore leave, after riding their stingrays on the surging high tide through the seawall culvert. We would sleep well tonight, with good dreams.

Andrew Austin

Ornithological snippets

Following on from last month's report, Janet Ledingham again saw the **Mute Swan** at Anderson's Lagoon near Palmerston on 3rd March. Visiting birder Matt Winter saw (& photographed!) 5 **Marsh Crakes** at Lake Hayes near Arrowtown on 26th February – how many more remain undiscovered? Patricia Dean reports that on 2nd March about 11.20 she heard a **Morepork** call - 3 times in a few minutes - from the direction of the town belt just below William Street [Serpentine Ave end]. She has never heard one from here before. A friend in Maori Rd whose house is tucked into the bush behind Jubilee Park football field told her she has never heard one in all their 40+ years of living there.

Mary Thompson went to check the birds at Aramoana on 9th March, a calm day. She saw 6 **Little Blue Penguins**; some actively fishing amongst schools of little fish and others just preening on top of water.



Out at the mole there was the usual March collection of 800+ **White-fronted Terns** with about 600 + **Red-billed Gulls**.



There were lots of juveniles among them, so still wondering where they breed in such profusion.

There were only 110 **Bar-tailed Godwits** and by high tide they seemed to have gone off somewhere else without her noticing because when a **Harrier** flew over the **Black-fronted Terns**, **SIPOs** and **Black-backed Gulls** all flew up but no godwits.

compiled by **Richard Schofield**

Notices and Business

Request to search Archives NZ for Petrel information.

Colin MisKelly of Te Papa is trying to locate information on petrels breeding in Dusky Sound recorded by Fiordland National Park ranger Kim Morrison in 1984 & 1986. The trail has led him to the Dunedin office of Archives New Zealand, who have informed me that they do not loan files between offices. He is asking if there is anyone interested in searching the file on his behalf, and taking digital photos of any pages of interest. He can provide details of the file if anyone is interested in taking this on. They will probably need to become a registered 'reader' at Archives New Zealand before requesting the file, but this is a simple process.

Please let Mary know if you are interested, or email Colin Miskelly <Colin.Miskelly@tepapa.govt.nz> and Cc maryt@actrix.co.nz

Tomahawk Lagoon Bird Counts

This is our ongoing project to get as many counts as possible throughout the year entered on eBird so that this data will be available for analysis for years to come and contribute to knowledge of changes of bird numbers and distribution over time. So whenever you find you have time, the weather is nice, and you want to do some birdwatching, head to Tomahawk; the large lagoon can easily be observed from the road (Tomahawk Road just past the bridge) and the smaller lagoon is reached down Oregon Street (further along on the left), then down a driveway to "Walkway".

A recent visit turned up two Pied Shags. There have been only 4 recent visits recorded on eBird so get birding. There are very few ever for January to April.

Mary Thompson

Early-Bird registrations for NZ Bird Conference in Te Anau, close 31 March.

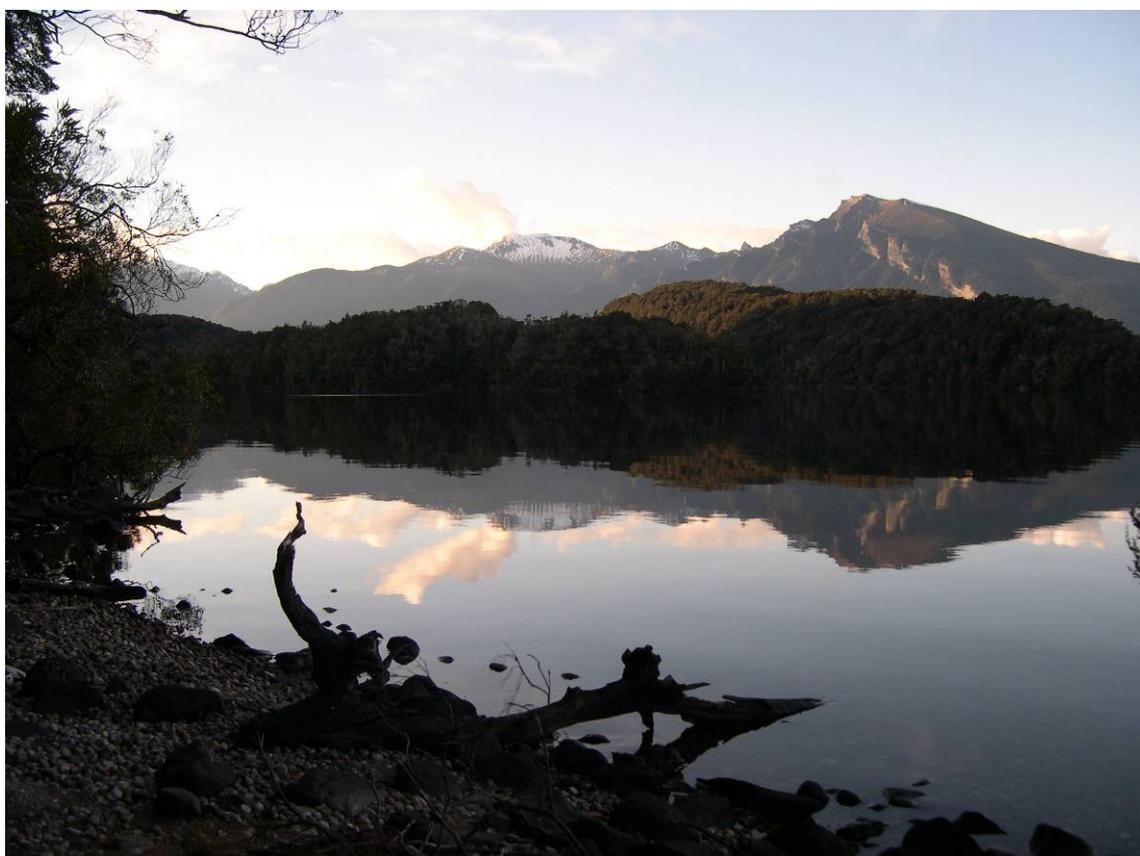
The 2017 New Zealand Bird Conference and Annual General Meeting of Birds New Zealand will be held in Te Anau, Southland during Queens Birthday Weekend. It is great to have this conference right on our doorstep again so hopefully a goodly number of Otago folk can make it. This should be a fantastic weekend of birds and birding. Bruce is taking a 8 seater

people mover to Te Anau on 1 June, back 5 June, so there is a free ride-first in first served.

Contact Bruce McKinlay <bruce.mckinlay@osnz.org.nz>

The conference again aims to continue the fine work of previous conferences in making this the premier New Zealand event for the communication of new research findings on New Zealand birds, with two days largely being devoted to scientific presentations, while also providing opportunity for discussion and networking and between bird researchers and birders in New Zealand. Several of our student members will be presenting their research to the conference.

A variety of workshops are planned for the Sunday morning, which include banding, wader identification, use of eBird, and reporting unusual birds. The Field Trips on the Monday look very exciting with a choice of a visit to Lake Orbell and Takahe Valley, exploring the Milford Road, tramping the Kepler to Iris Burn (and back) and to Awarua Bay. Register early to hopefully get your first choice. Early Bird Registrations close 31 March. Register online at <http://www.osnz.org.nz/node/841> or ask Mary Thompson for a print version if you don't have computer access.



Programme 2017

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

- Wed March 22nd** Indoor Meeting. Kalinka Rexer-Huber. Latest seabird research.
- Sat April 8th** Sinclair Wetlands Autumn Survey. Carpool leaving Dunedin 9.00am. Backup Sunday April 9th. To join the survey teams and for information contact Mary Thompson 464 0787, maryt@actrix.co.nz
- Sun April 23rd** Tomahawk lagoon guided birdwatching. 10am -12 This is our contribution to the Wild Dunedin Festival. Meet by the large Tomahawk Lagoon just after the bridge on Tomahawk Road. We aim to have telescopes to let the public see birds close-up and to help identify them, etc. Contact Andrew if you can help; phone 454 5830
- Wed April 26th** Indoor Meeting. Sophie Fern. What does the public know about some of our native birds?
- Wed May 24th** Indoor Meeting. Thomas Mattern. Ecology and breeding biology of Tawaki, Fiordland Crested Penguin.
- Jun 2nd to Jun 5th** NZ Bird Conference and AGM. Te Anau.
- Wed June 28th** Indoor Meeting. Bruce McKinlay. How to discover new things about our birds using eBird data.
- Sun July 2nd** Winter Wader Count. High tide Dunedin 10.54 hrs. Height 1.9m. Counters needed at Aramoana, Hoopers & Papanui Inlets. New counters welcome. Contact: peter.schweigman@xtra.co.nz

Sat July 15 Sinclair Wetlands Winter Survey. Carpool leaving Dunedin at 9.00 am. Backup Sunday July 16. To join the survey teams and for information contact Mary Thompson 464 0787, maryt@actrix.co.nz

Wed July 26 Indoor Meeting. Helen Taylor. "Bird sperm quality in the wild: what, how, and why?"

Please give Mary suggestions for speakers or topics Indoor Meetings later in the year.

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

Contributions for next newsletter please by 20th April.

Can contributors please send any photographs separately from text as it makes compiling and formatting the newsletter much simpler and retains picture quality better. Thanks.