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(INCORPORATED)

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Otago Region Newsletter 10/2007 November 2007

Survey of Hawkesbury Lagoon

On Sunday, 11 November 2007, five of us travelled to Waikouaiti to start the planned quarterly survey of Hawkesbury Lagoon. The weather was overcast and the lagoon high and discoloured. We counted a total of 577 birds of 17 species. Using Derek Onley's superior audio skills we added a further 10 species to the list. Two sightings stand out for me. They were the pair of **Variable Oystercatchers** sheltering in the lee of a causeway and several hybrid **Canada Geese**. The most common bird was **Mallard** with 155 birds followed by **Paradise Duck** with 117 birds.

Jim Wilson



Peter Schweigman, Susan Schweigman, Jim Wilson and Derek Onley counting ducks at Hawkesbury Lagoon, 11 November 2007

Blue-throated Macaws (*Ara glaucogularis*) in Beni, Bolivia.

As I sit in the palm leaf hide, making observations at a nest hole of **Blue-throated Macaws**, I can identify another five parrot species calling from the canopy. These range in size from the small **Canary-winged Parakeets** to the nearly 1m long **Red-and-green Macaws**. Outside a soft warm rain is falling, unlike the usual tropical downpours which have recently begun to fill up the ponds and marshes. Until recently the immense diversity of water birds has been restricted to a few small muddy puddles. Only two weeks ago I counted 15 different species of aquatic birds gathered around a muddy puddle, making the most of the helpless fish remaining in a

few centimetres of sludgy mud. This part of Bolivia, with palm tree islands set among sprawling grasslands and intercepted by sluggish waterways, is a true bird-watcher's paradise. Forest birds, aquatic birds and grassland species abound.



The province of Beni, located in North Eastern Bolivia, is a fascinating place. It is the richest province within Bolivia after making its fortune in the 1980s by exporting raw materials for the cocaine trade. Since then it has quietened down and vast cattle ranches abound. Though several forested islands are deliberately left to provide shelter for livestock, large scale deforestation has greatly reduced the amount of wildlife. The climate is extremely hot with daytime temperatures nearly always well above 30°C. For half of the year heavy rains render the low lying ground flooded and for the remaining six months hot sun bakes the ground dry. Now, in October, the dry season is just ending.

Blue-throated Macaws are an endangered species endemic to the province of Beni. Fewer than 150 individuals are thought to remain. Though this figure is largely based on speculation, locals and parrot biologists agree that the species is in strife. A shortage of suitable nest cavities is thought to be a major reason for the decline of **Blue-throated Macaws**, especially as they are often out-competed by the larger and more aggressive **Blue-and-yellow** and **Red-and-green Macaws**. In addition to this, illegal poaching for the pet trade occurs. Natural nest predators include large **Toucans**, **Giant Horned Owls**, **Crane Hawks** (which have specialised long legs for extracting prey from tree cavities) and a native carnivorous mammal related to racoons.

The World Parrot Trust funds a nest monitoring project for six months each year, there being no money within Bolivia to run such a project. Brent and myself have been able to commit two and a half months helping out. At present the **Blue-throated Macaws** are either in the late stages of incubation or feeding young chicks. Incubation takes one month and then another three months are needed until the young fledge. Our duties here include three-hour shifts observing the nests as well as longer walks looking for more nests. Every two days the chicks are lowered to the ground and weighed to ensure that they are gaining weight. In most nests with three chicks supplementary food is given to the smallest.

The hardest factor out here is the transport problem between different sites. Moving between places is often done on horse back, especially after the truck got stuck last week and was eventually hauled out by two gigantic bullocks; tractors and winches are in short supply in the Bolivian Llanos. Our accommodation has been in either

tents in a bush camp or living with the local farm workers. It has been very enjoyable living with generous Bolivians and watching the workings of the vaqueros or cowboys.

Though it often feels too hot to go for long excursions, walks are always rewarding. The forest contains at least 10 parrot species, toucans, woodpeckers, hummingbirds, woodcreepers, guans, wrens, owls and nightjars. The grasslands fascinate me, full of small finches, countless flycatcher species, several raptors and giant rheas. At night the grasslands are transformed as thousands of fireflies blink and fly about. The most obvious birds are near the waterways, gigantic **Jabiru** storks, over eight heron species, five ibis species, flocks of hundreds of ducks, jacanas, rails and even greenshanks and sandpipers. Rather frustratingly there is still no field guide to the birds of Bolivia, however with a field guide to birds of Colombia and another of Birds of Southern South America, I am able to identify nearly everything. In fact about the only species I have failed to find between these two books has been the **Blue-throated Macaw!**

For those of us not purely interested in birds, mammals and reptiles are plentiful. Giant anteaters, armadillos, howler monkeys, forest rats, capybaras, foxes, crocodiles, large boas and several lizards are all regularly seen. Jaguars are around but sadly hunting pressure renders them difficult to see. My time here with the macaws has been more than rewarding so far, they are a beautiful charismatic bird and live in one of the most animal diverse places that we have left.

Francesca Cunninghame.

Dart/Rees Braided River Bird Survey, 27 & 28 October 2007

On Saturday, 27 October a group of 11 DOC workers, OSNZ members and other volunteers were dropped off by jet boat at the head of Lake Wakatipu on a clear sunny morning cooled by a steady southerly breeze. The 2007 Dart & Rees braided river bird survey had begun. Stretched out in a tenuous chain across the valley floor at a precise 100m spacing, equipped with radio, GPS, Binoculars, clipboard and our ever important lunch, we set off following our GPS transects, scanning ahead for birds.

Although a straight line looks good on a map, walking in a straight line on a braided river is quite another matter. I was one of the lucky ones who finished the day with dry feet, some however had to frequently cross river braids and take considerable detours, while at the same time trying to keep in line and of course not miss any birds.

This opportunity was perfect for people like me, who have had little experience with nesting birds and their preferred habitat. It wasn't long before the first **Wrybill** nest was found, quickly followed by the first **Banded Dotterel** nest. So the day continued with friendly banter and news of new birds and nests crackling over the radio, plus the occasional instruction to keep in line. Spaced over 1km across the valley floor,

lunch consisted of many little huddles of two or three people, the furthest only visible through binoculars.

Feeling a little left out, having not yet found any nests of my own before lunch, I soon cheered up when I discovered that the only **Black-fronted Tern** colony on the river was right on my transect. I was lucky enough to see nests up close and experience the terns' determined protection of their colony. The day was capped off near the end of the river walk by passing Dart Island, where **Tuis** and **NZ Pigeons** were plentiful and in full song due to the island's flowering kowhai trees.

The Sunday walk up the Rees was again under perfectly clear skies and the wind had let up making it nice and warm. The walk was shorter than the previous day and the valley not so wide. There were fewer surveyors and we recorded fewer birds. I was lucky enough to find a **Canada Goose** nest and come across a lone **Banded Dotterel** chick.



The weekend was a great way to meet and learn from some experienced bird watchers and see the nests, eggs and chicks of some very special little birds.

Keith Payne

Trial of Email Newsletter

Many of you will have received a pdf copy of this November Newsletter by email as well as mail. It is quite a big job to photocopy, collate, address and post the newsletters so if you are happy to receive the newsletter **only by email**, or if you would like to but didn't, please send your email address with your request by 1 December to mary.thompson@stonebow.otago.ac.nz

News from your RR

I have been granted Study Leave (sabbatical) for part of next year so I will be away from mid January to mid September. I will be doing research at the Obesity Biology Unit at the University of Liverpool. While I am away Peter Schweigman is happy to help look after the fieldtrips and bird surveys (☎ 455 2790), and Hamish Spencer and Louise Foord have kindly agreed to look after the Indoor Meetings. And everyone is to look out for birds! I am sorry to be missing the banded Godwits and the fieldtrip to Glenorchy. But I have recently discovered via the internet that a bonus of going to Liverpool is that it is right next to the Dee Estuary which is considered a premier wintering site for waders and wildfowl, so I couldn't have chosen a better place!

Mary Thompson

Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*)

As another visitor from Australia to Otago, the **Little Egret** (*Egretta garzetta*) is just as irregular as the **Glossy Ibis** (see Otago Region Newsletter 9/2007 October 2007). There are two main locations in which this species has been reported, the Karitane/Merton area and around the Waihola/Waipori Lakes. Initially all sightings, bar one, were in the Karitane/Merton area from 1962 till 1966 with the first report of two on 26 August 1962 (J.H. Allen) and still present on 3 September 1962. (L.E. Walker). This trend continued with three sightings in 1963, one each on 24 March, 28 September and 16 November. In 1964 there were sightings in July, September, October and November. In 1965 there were four sightings of one or two. And one sighting of two birds in August in 1966.



The presence of the egrets dried up in the Karitane area for a while (1966-1970). The only sighting 4 years later was at Ram Island, presumably Waipori, seen by Jill Hamel on 31 May 1970. The next sightings in April/May 1971, May 1975 and August 1976 came from Karitane again. All were sightings of single birds. After an 11 year gap the last report for that area was in May 1987, seen by Tony & Anne Hocken. The report of the egret at Berwick on 4 June 1987, seen by Alison Nevill, could have been the same bird. For some reason there was a shift from Karitane to Waipori/Waihola noticeable at this time. From February until November 1989 five reports came in of mostly two birds seen at Waihola and Berwick. There was no sighting in 1990 and only one in 1991, on 25 August at Berwick, seen by George and Doreen Grant. A year later, on 14 June 1992, one was seen by Dave and Janet York, and on 7 July 1992, assumed to be the same bird, seen by Alison Nevill.

The only reports since 1992 came mostly from All Day Bay, and most likely the same bird: 1993, 15 April, Tony & Anne Hocken, 22 April, Dave and Janet York, 23 April and 9 July, Tony & Anne Hocken. And there is one date in between, 13 June with one at Blueskin Bay, seen by Dave and Janet York.

And the last recorded sighting in Otago was on 19 May 1994 at Hawkesbury lagoon, seen by Jim Wilson. Of all these records, only two are summer ones, which is no surprise. The surprise is the lack of these egrets for over the last 13 years.

Peter Schweigman

Assistants for Godwit Banding

The Wader Study Team will be in Southland (Awarua Bay) 9-14 January 2008, and 19-24 February 2008. There are also banding trips scheduled for Parengarenga and Golden Bay. Otago OSNZ members who would like to be involved in band-spotting

of marked godwits and adding more marked birds at these sites over the summer should contact Rob Schuckard (email rschckrd@xtra.co.nz)

Proposed Weekend Fieldtrip to Glenorchy, 21 - 24 March, 2008

This is the Easter weekend and also coincides with Otago Anniversary. The plan is to stay at Glenorchy and explore the surrounding areas; it may be possible to organise a trip up the Rees or Dart. At this stage we need to have a good idea of how many are likely to come so that suitable accommodation can be arranged well ahead. Please let Louise Foord (☎ 467 5041) know as soon as possible if you are at all interested.

Ornithological Snippets

Jill Hamel reports 21 **Spoonbills** turning up at dusk at low tide, 7.45 pm, 25 October 2007, at Andersons Bay inlet, feeding frantically. She has been monitoring the inlet all year, and the last time she saw spoonbills during the day was 3 May 2007. Now they seem to be there fairly regularly at dusk or dawn if the tide is out, but still not during the day.



On 17 October 2007 Peter Schweigman was at St Kilda Beach and came across a fantastic sight of millions, yes, millions of **Sooty Shearwaters**. He scanned the surf all the way to Bird Island and followed this up by checking the ocean at St. Clair, Ocean View

and Brighton. Every stop gave cartwheeling millions of shearwaters, all flying south, except the Brighton ones, who flew north. The time was in between 1400 and 1530 hrs. He made another trip at 1730 and there was no let off at St Kilda: still millions, but now all flying north. The next day at 0900 there was still no difference in numbers, they only were not as close to the surf. He wonders how many he didn't see. Around the Peninsula and from Brighton to Stewart Island is a fair stretch compared with his 20 km.

Len Buchanan confirms that the banded **Black Stilt** is back at the Brighton Lagoon and is breeding. Lala Frazer found a band on a bone during a recent beach clean up we had on the Peninsula, and it proved to be a **Pied Stilt** that had been banded just over 2½ years ago at Awarua, 186 km away.

Richard Schofield reports seeing 4 **Little Owls** in the space of less than 2 minutes while driving up Clutha Valley Road from Balclutha (early) on the morning of 10

October 2007, with another at Waitahuna West about 20 minutes later. These sightings suggest they may have been under-recorded for the Atlas. Richard also saw a pair of **NZ Falcons** at Wetherstons, near Lawrence, later that morning.

In early November 2007, Keith Payne saw two **Eastern Rosellas** near Signal Hill, just off Opoho Road in a paddock full of flowering broom where he was watching a flock of about 20 **NZ Pigeons** feeding. Another two were on the path down to Sullivans dam.

Programme 2007

Monthly Indoor Meetings will be held in the Benham Seminar Room, Benham Building, Department of Zoology, 340 Great King Street at 8 p.m. Please be on time: the door will be locked after 8 p.m.

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| Saturday, 24 November | Godwit Band Spotting, Hooper's Inlet. 1.00pm onwards
Contact Peter Schweigman, ☎ 455 2790 |
| Wednesday, 28 November | Indoor Meeting Speaker: Ian Jamieson
Topic: What exactly happens when you release a bunch of birds onto island sanctuaries: founder effects, inbreeding and loss of genetic diversity? |

Programme 2008

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| Saturday, 26 January | Summer Survey of Hawkesbury Lagoon
Contact Jim Wilson, ☎ 476 3235 |
| Saturday 23 February | Otago Godwit Census
Contact Peter Schweigman, ☎ 455 2790 |
| Wednesday, 27 February | Indoor Meeting Speaker: Neville Peat
Topic: A Writer's View of Kiwi and Other Birds |
| Weekend, 21-24 March | Glenorchy Weekend Fieldtrip.
Contact Louise Foord, ☎ 467 5041 |
| Sunday, 13 April | Autumn Survey of Hawkesbury Lagoon |
| Saturday 28 June | Winter Survey of Hawkesbury Lagoon |

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