

# ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND (INC.)

## WANGANUI BRANCH



Birding Wanganui

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## Newsletter June 2009

This is the first of what I hope will be a long series of newsletters from this branch. It will carry interesting sightings of birds and bird behaviour; articles of interest about birds; reports; photographs; Ornithological Society of New Zealand (OSNZ) and regional (Birding Wanganui) news; and details of recent and upcoming events. It is your newsletter, so the more you send in, the thicker and more interesting it will be.

Up to now, information about recent sightings, photographs of birds taken locally, and general branch news has been circulated to an e-mail list of almost 40 people. Many on the list would prefer to receive consolidated information rather than have their e-mail inboxes cluttered up with a pile of e-mails in which they have only peripheral interest. I hope that the newsletter will solve this problem, while stimulating further interest. The plan is to circulate it to everyone currently on the e-mail list, as well as to schools, libraries, and other OSNZ branches. E-mails of more immediate interest will then only be circulated to those who want to receive them. Nevertheless, I will continue to send out notices of the monthly meetings and upcoming events such as field trips to the wider group. If you want to continue receiving both the newsletter and the normal crop of e-mails, please let me know. Of course, I will summarise periodically in the newsletter whatever is of general interest in these e-mails, so you will still be informed about what has been going on, just not so immediately.

*Peter Frost*

### Some unusual sightings

The recent wintery weather has produced a crop of interesting and unusual sightings. On 25<sup>th</sup> May, Dawne Morton of Bird Rescue, Turakina, was brought a stranded **White-chinned Petrel**, *Procellaria aequinoctialis*, which had been found near Otoko Marae, 43 km inland along SH4. This is 37 km inland from the nearest coast (South Beach, Wanganui). Dawne took it to Paul Gibson, who confirmed its identification and photographed it (below left). The bird seemed reasonably healthy but was taken to Massey University to be checked.

Although White-chinned Petrel are occasionally recorded at sea off the North Island, this is one of the first land-based records. The only other recent record appears to be one picked up injured at Opotiki (Bay of Plenty) in December 2001. "Black Petrel sp." have been recorded from Foxton Beach a number of times over the past 10 years but have always been assumed to be either Black Petrel *P. parkinsoni* or Westland Petrel *P. westlandica*. Those assumptions may need to be revised following this record. Note the pale tip to the bill. The other two black petrel species have dark tips. The white chin is just visible at the base of the lower mandible.



A few days later, on 27<sup>th</sup> May, Dawne had a call from a farmer on Campbell Rd, between Bunnythorpe and Feilding, about a Light-mantled **Sooty Albatross**, *Phoebastria palpebrata*, with a broken wing, which had been found under power wires. A Bird Rescue volunteer from Feilding collected the bird and took it to the veterinary school at Massey University. Then, on 2<sup>nd</sup> June, she collected another Light-mantled Sooty Albatross, this time from RD 219 on the Mt Stewart-Halcombe Road, off SH3. This bird appeared uninjured but was taken to Massey University for a check. Both these records are from the OSNZ's Manawatu Region (Regional Representative and Recorder, Sav Saville), but they illustrate the reality that when we get gale force onshore winds, some seabirds may end up inland.

Finally, to cap it off, on 16<sup>th</sup> June Dawne was called to pick up an injured **White-headed Petrel**, *Pterodroma lessoni*, which had been found at the North Mole, Whanganui River mouth. This bird too was taken to Massey University to see if it could be rehabilitated. This is a beautiful petrel, as both Paul Gibson and Peter Frost can attest, as they've been lucky



enough to see them in different parts of the sub-Antarctic. Its relatively large size, white head, and broad dark eye patch are quite distinctive. In an email reporting the sighting, Paul attached a picture of one that he photographed last year on his sub-Antarctic trip (left). How many other interesting seabirds have washed up on the coast recently? If you go walking along the beaches anywhere and you find the identifiable remains of any seabirds, put them in a plastic bag and bring them back for identification.

Either Paul or Peter will be willing to help you identify the specimen. The Whanganui Regional Museum is always willing to receive relatively intact specimens for their collection. The OSNZ runs a Beach Patrol scheme, to gather data on the species, numbers, localities, and times of year when seabirds become stranded or die on our beaches. You can get more information on doing beach patrols from <http://www.osnz.org.nz/studies.htm#beachpatrol>, where you can also download forms for reporting what you find.

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### Banded Red-billed Gulls

Dawne is not the only one who has been busy turning up interesting records. Lynne Douglas has been photographing birds along the Whanganui River estuary recently, among them a number of colour-banded Red-billed Gulls.



M-O Wharf Street slipway 6 June 2009



?-GWY Wharf Street slipway 29 May 2009



MK-RKK Wharf Street slipway 14 June 2009



MY-YGK Wharf Street slipway 6 June 2009

These are probably birds banded by Dr Jim Mills, who formerly worked with the NZ Wildlife Service and Department of Conservation, but who now lives in the USA. His study, carried out since 1964 at a large colony (>5000 pairs) on the Kaikoura Peninsula, is one of the longest-running studies of a single species anywhere, focusing on the species' breeding biology, social organisation, behaviour, diet, movements, population dynamics, and life-time reproductive success. Many birds have been individually marked since 1958 with combinations of coloured bands and a numbered metal one; some have been marked with a single colour band and a metal ring; and some have been given a large colour band engraved with both alphabetic and numeric characters. Marked birds have been recorded from across New Zealand, but additional reports are needed, to establish individual life histories.

Over the past few years we have recorded colour-banded Caspian Tern, Red-billed Gull, and Royal Spoonbill on the Whanganui Estuary. Peter Frost has also seen colour-banded Caspian Tern at Koitiata Lagoon, near the mouth of the Turakina River. So far, the terns we have seen have come from Bell Island, Nelson, and Onoke Spit, Palliser Bay. If you see any colour-banded birds of these or any other species please record the combination carefully, noting the colour of the rings from top to bottom on each leg separately, starting with the left leg. Note the position of the metal band in this sequence. Codes for colours are: Red (R), Orange (O), Yellow (Y), Green (G), Lime or Pale Green (L), Blue (B), Aqua or Light Blue (A), White (W), Black (K) and Metal (M). For example, the band combination on the bird above right is MY-YGK. Note that in this case, the yellow colour is extremely faded, looking almost white. Fading and discoloration are a significant problem, even though the Darvic® rings are advertised as being UV resistant and colourfast. They are not, so double check any colours that look faded or discoloured. A photograph always helps.

Send this information, along with the name of the species, the locality where the marked individual was seen, and the date and time to:

Dr Graeme Taylor  
Scientific Officer (Banding and Marking)  
Research, Development and Improvement Division  
Department of Conservation  
PO Box 10420  
Wellington  
New Zealand 6001  
email: [gtaylor@doc.govt.nz](mailto:gtaylor@doc.govt.nz)

If you can copy this information to me (Peter Frost [birds.wanganui@xtra.co.nz](mailto:birds.wanganui@xtra.co.nz)) even better.

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## Banded Dotterel

Lynne Douglas has not only been busy recording colour-banded gulls, but has also been noting flocks of Banded Dotterel on the Whanganui River estuary. Paul Gibson and Ian Sutherland have also reported some large flocks. Their records, all from near or opposite Wanganui Sailing Club on Gilbert Street, are as follows:

11 May 2009	30-40 (Lynne Douglas)
28 May 2009	~90 (Lynne Douglas). Paul Gibson recorded "dozens" at the same site late that evening.
2 June 2009	32 (Ian Sutherland)
3 June 2009	~30 (Lynne Douglas)
5 June 2009	~100 (Lynne Douglas, with a photograph of part of the flock, showing 39 birds). Paul Gibson later counted 69 at the same site.
8 June 2009	88 (Ian Sutherland)
19 June 2009	47 (Paul Gibson)

These appear to be transient birds as they are often there one afternoon and gone the next day. We do not know if these are birds moving from the South Island northwards, or if they are bands of birds moving up and down the coast from one estuary to the next. Observations from the Waitotara, Whangaehu, Turakina, and Rangitikei estuaries would be welcome. It also shows the value of frequent observations on these small estuaries where birds move through rapidly. Peter Frost only recorded Banded Dotterel once last year, towards the end of May, when he counted a flock of 89 birds late one afternoon. They had gone by the next day. This year, despite reasonably regular monitoring, no Banded Dotterel were seen during the counts (see next item).

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## Comings and goings on the Whanganui R estuary

Peter Frost has continued to count the waders and waterbirds on the northern side of the estuary below Cobham Bridge. Relatively few birds use the south bank. The following table shows the numbers of birds recorded along the 1.7 km stretch of estuary.

Date	11 May	12 May	14 May	19 May	4 June	11 June	18 June
Start time	14:00	10:00	10:10	10:00	8:40	14:45	15:05
End time	14:50	10:35	10:50	10:55	10:00	16:10	16:30
Royal Spoonbill	8	10	9	10	5	9	7
Pied Oyster-catcher	0	0	0	0	0	2	4
Spur-wing Plover	2	5	4	2	4	13	10
Pied Stilt	16	33	20	30	32	24	26
Bar-tailed Godwit	9	4	4	4	4	2	2
Black-backed Gull	257	200	200	182	138	269	365
Red-billed Gull	221	4	12	36	52	72	172
Black-billed Gull	1	0	0	0	0	2	0
Caspian Tern	5	4	8	2	16	7	7
White-fronted Tern	0	0	1	37	0	3	0
White-faced Heron	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Reef Heron	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Black Shag	11	17	17	17	15	24	9
Little Black Shag	2	0	0	1	0	2	1
Little (Pied) Shag	0	1	1	0	1	1	1
Spotted Shag	0	0	0	0	2	7	8
Mallard	2	37	2	0	7	91	99
Paradise Shelduck	2	0	0	0	0	0	2

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A couple of things stand out. First, no **Banded Dotterels** were seen, although they were recorded during this period by others (see previous item), both in the days before and after these counts. Second, the sighting of a **Reef Heron** on 14<sup>th</sup> June is out of the ordinary. This species inhabits rocky shores. The nearest known population is along the coast south of New Plymouth. There are regular records from the rocky coast around Wellington, so there may be a small resident population there also.



Ormond Torr photographed one at Beach Rd on 19<sup>th</sup> Feb 1989, and saw what was presumably the same individual later the same year near Pitzac's (5<sup>th</sup> June) and Corliss Island (1<sup>st</sup> July). The birds seen on 14<sup>th</sup> June was an immature (brownish tinge to the otherwise darkish grey plumage), so it has probably become a vagrant during post-breeding dispersal. The photograph on the left shows a bird photographed 4 km north of Cape Egmont on 8<sup>th</sup> October last year. Note the bright yellow legs and feet, and relatively long and heavy bill, prominent characters of the bird seen at the estuary on 14<sup>th</sup>.

The third notable point about the counts is the fluctuating numbers of **Red-billed Gulls**. Numbers varied from 221 on 11<sup>th</sup> May to only 4 a day later. Between 31<sup>st</sup> May and 3<sup>rd</sup> June, Paul Gibson, Ormond Torr, and Lynne Douglas all individually noted between 800 and 1000 or more Red-billed Gulls on the estuary and on the South Mole. These birds were probably sheltering from the extremely strong southerly winds blowing on 31<sup>st</sup> May and 1<sup>st</sup> June. This seems to have been the pattern on previous occasions when we have experienced gale-force onshore winds; the gulls come into the estuary to shelter, then gradually disperse again in the days afterwards.

While on the topic of gulls, note the occasional presence of **Black-billed Gulls**. In addition to these, Peter Frost also saw and photographed a bird around Taupo Quay on 16<sup>th</sup> May and 13<sup>th</sup> June. Given the difficulty of distinguishing immature Black-billed and Red-billed Gulls, especially at a distance and when not seen in flight, one wonders how often Black-billed Gulls are overlooked among large flocks of Red-billed Gull.

Finally, are the numbers of **Spotted Shags** building up, as they did last year? This species also prefers rocky shores and seems out of place here, but last year we had up to 14 present in the lower estuary in late winter and early spring. We have few records from preceding years, but this may reflect more a shortage of observers as of the birds themselves. It will be interesting to see if the build up continues and, if so, what numbers are involved.

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### **Are Eastern Rosella spreading southwards in this region?**

The recent upsurge in reports of Eastern Rosella raises the question of whether these sightings reflect an increase in the range of this species into the coastal region locally, or if the species has been overlooked or unreported up to now. Jim Campbell (DoC) says that rosellas are widespread throughout the region, a perception that is supported for the northern part of Wanganui and adjacent districts (Atlas of Bird Distribution in New Zealand, 1999-2004). Nevertheless, the Atlas shows only scattered records in our coastal region (although there is a small population in the southern Tararua Range near Wellington, and Paul Gibson has recorded birds at Palmerston North). If we are on the cusp of a population increase then it would be good to keep records of any sightings of this species (when, where, and how many). Please send these to the OSNZ Regional Recorder ([birds.wanganui@xtra.co.nz](mailto:birds.wanganui@xtra.co.nz)).

For the record, rosellas have been recorded recently at the following localities (numbers, date and name of observer in brackets):

Virginia Rd, Wanganui (2, Aug. and Sept. 2008, Keith Beautrais)

Tokomaru Road East ('small flock', Aug. 2008, as reported to Paul Gibson)

Brunswick R22 831 486 (1, 24 Dec. 2008 and 1, 19 April 2009, Derek Onley)

Waitahinga, Rangitatau East Road (2, first week of January 2009, as reported by Sheree Swanson to Phil Thomsen)

Matipo Park, Fordell (3, 12 April 2009, Ormond Torr)

Lismore Forest (heard, early May 2009, Ormond Torr)

Ranana (12-15, 7 June 2009, Fiona Lovatt Davis)

Upper Roberts Avenue, Aramoho (between 2 and about 12, May-June, Alison Pickett)

Colin Ogle also heard rosellas at Gordon Park sometime last year, and Keith Beautrais mentioned that about half-a-dozen birds had been shot at Bushy Park between early 2007 and mid 2008, in an attempt to prevent them colonising this recently created "mainland island" conservation park.



(a)



(b)

Photos of Eastern Rosella taken in Palmerston North (Paul Gibson) and at Matipo Park (Ormond Torr). Both are photographs taken for the record only.

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### **Nankeen Night Heron**

Peter Frost (PF) and Paul Gibson (PG) are continuing intermittent monitoring of the Nankeen Night Heron roost just off Kauarapaoa Rd. The birds are no longer using the roadside roost that they frequented last year but have moved back to their old roost in the macrocarpas at Kemp's Pole, at the mouth of the Kauarapaoa Stream. On 12th April, PF recorded 5 birds leaving the roost 25-30 minutes after sunset, at which point it was almost dark (light intensities about 1 lux), so there may have been others. It is not as easy to record the birds leaving this roost as it was at their previous one, but perhaps they are less disturbed, more so now that the District Council are rebuilding the causeway over the Mangaiti stream nearby.

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Between 16<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> April, PF, PG, Derek Onley (Otago) and Bruce Shanks (Auckland) visited this roost a number of times, courtesy of Kevin Mills, the local farmer over whose land one must go to get close to the roost. (The roost itself is on Maori land and is not accessible without permission and a boat, as the Kauarapaoa Stream separates the observation point from the trees in which the birds roost.) Peter and Derek saw 3 different birds, all adults, but believe that there was at least one more present there. PG photographed one adult with white nape plumes on 18<sup>th</sup> April, and heard other birds. He and Bruce (on 20<sup>th</sup> April), and then Bruce alone (21<sup>st</sup> April), again went out but did not see any birds, although some could be heard squabbling in the trees. We continue to monitor this group. If you want to see them (assuming a fair measure of luck), please contact either Peter Frost or Paul Gibson ([wanganui.accounting.services@xtra.co.nz](mailto:wanganui.accounting.services@xtra.co.nz)). We have to get permission from the farmer, as getting close to the roost requires crossing his land.

During last year and earlier this year, we had received reports of Nankeen Night Heron being seen roosting in a cypress tree next to the convent at Jerusalem from Laurel Stowell, Dr Peter van Dyk, and Rosalie Irwin. In February, Sister Sue Cosgrove of the Sisters of Compassion Convent at Jerusalem reported seeing what she believed were three young birds flying out of a tree in the convent orchard. In April, Bruce Shanks, while visiting Jerusalem as part of a Photographic Society of New Zealand excursion, heard about night herons roosting nearby, and that a young bird had been caught by cat. Unfortunately, he was unable to get to see the birds or speak to the owner of the property, but the information was confirmed separately by the principal of Whanganui Awa School at Ranana, Fiona Lovatt Davis. One of her pupils was the boy who had found and tried to rescue the bird.

The upshot of this was that Barbara Lovatt, the OSNZ Regional Representative for the Wairarapa, received an invitation from Fiona, her daughter, to take part in the school's Education Outside the Classroom, to talk to the 25 school children about birds, and especially the Nankeen Night Heron. This species has considerable cultural significance to local *iwi* because the birds are considered to be *kaitiaki* (caretakers), keeping watch over the remains of a *tupuna*, Hohepa Te Umuroa, whose body had been brought back to Jerusalem in 1988 for reburial from Tasmania. He had been exiled there as a political prisoner in 1846, following an incident in the Hutt Valley in which he was said to have taken part, dying there in 1847 of tuberculosis. The Nankeen Night Herons were first noticed in Jerusalem soon after he was reburied there, and are said to have carried him home, in a spiritual sense.



Peter Frost joined Barbara Lovatt and seven other OSNZ members from the Wairarapa. It was an opportunity to talk to the children about the Nankeen Night Heron and other birds, and to show them how to use binoculars and telescopes, and observe how birds live. As luck would have it, just after school broke up and the children were leaving, a Nankeen Night Heron appeared in a nearby leafless chestnut tree overlooking the Jerusalem marae (left). Later that evening, Barbara and her husband Des heard about 5 birds calling as they flew over the convent after dark. The next morning, the children reported seeing a night heron perched in the same tree as they arrived at *Morikaunui wharekai* for the day's activities. Not surprisingly, this generated considerable interest.

Sister Cosgrove subsequently reported a night heron flying over the marae at Ranana on 18<sup>th</sup> June, apparently another place where they are regularly seen. Clearly, a survey of the Whanganui R from Pipiriki to Wanganui would be useful, though it will need some careful planning, given the species' cultural significance.

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## News from the Ornithological Society of New Zealand

The OSNZ held its Annual General Meeting at Orewa, north of Auckland, over Queen's Birthday weekend (30<sup>th</sup> May – 1<sup>st</sup> June). The OSNZ Council and the Regional Representatives had both separate and joint meetings the previous afternoon at which a range of subjects on the functioning of the Society were discussed (more later). Peter Frost attended as the Regional Representative for Wanganui.

The AGM itself comprised a Scientific Day (Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> May), at which 15 papers and a number of posters were presented, followed by dinner and the AGM. The following day involved field trips to various local attractions, principally Tiritiri Matangi Island and Tawharanui Regional Park, a 588 ha fenced-off headland supporting small populations of Kiwi, Pateke, Kaka, Red-crowned Kakariki, and NZ Dotterel. Although the weather closed in towards the end of the day, everyone had a good time. Steve Braunias, a well-known writer (most notably for our purposes, *How to Watch a Bird*, Awa Press, Wellington, 2007) was the after-dinner speaker at the AGM Dinner that night. He gave an extremely witty account of some of the background to writing the book, including humorous digs at various characters in the audience who feature in the book.

The papers covered a range of topics from single-species surveys (NZ Falcon, NZ Fairy Tern, Kea), feeding and other behaviour studies (Kaka, Banded Rail, Peafowl), movements and migration (Bar-tailed Godwit and Red Knot), monitoring (development of bioacoustic monitoring to detect movements of birds around potential windfarm sites; seabird colony database), to descriptions of various conservation initiatives (Auckland Regional Parks strategy, Tiritiri Matangi Island, BirdLife International's Important Bird Areas concept), a study of the effects of ectoparasitism on the reproductive success of Little Blue Penguins, and the impending publication of a revised checklist of birds of New Zealand. If anyone is interested in the abstracts of these papers, please contact Peter Frost ([birds.wanganui@xtra.co.nz](mailto:birds.wanganui@xtra.co.nz)).

Among some of the points from the AGM overall was a decision to get the Projects and Activities Committee up and running, to provide guidance to regions on promoting activities and field courses to stimulate members' interests and involvement. The New Zealand Bird Report for 2007 is being finalised, and will replace the Classified Summarised Notes, which used to be published annually as an item in Notornis, the Society's scientific journal. Regional Recorders are responsible for collecting and compiling from members records of birds seen in their region, and putting them in a regional context. In this way, the annual report will become the principal repository of sightings made by individual members. So, if you see anything interesting or unusual, please send them to Peter Frost or Paul Gibson, who are collating records locally.

Another publication that will appear soon is the State of New Zealand Birds 2008. This report is based on the conservation of birds on the mainland, and comprises various papers describing both research studies and conservation action in both fenced and unfenced areas of the mainland. Many of these have been written by staff from the Department of Conservation, Landcare Research, and the universities. Publication of this report, like the ones before it on New Zealand's seabirds (2006) and key findings from the Bird Atlas scheme (2007), is one way in which the Society makes available to government and the broader public reliable scientific information on New Zealand birds.

Finally, use of the e-Bird recording scheme, whereby people can record their sightings online (see <http://ebird.org/content/newzealand> for details) is increasing but not as fast as its proponents would like. Registering to use the scheme is simple, and it provides an ideal way of making your observations available to others. Likewise, you can benefit from theirs ("Where can I see Whiteheads closest to Wanganui?"). More detail about using the scheme will be given in the next newsletter, and discussed at one of the upcoming monthly meetings. A training CD is available (contact Peter Frost).

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## 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, New Zealand (email: [yvonnemackenzie@hotmail.com](mailto:yvonnemackenzie@hotmail.com)).

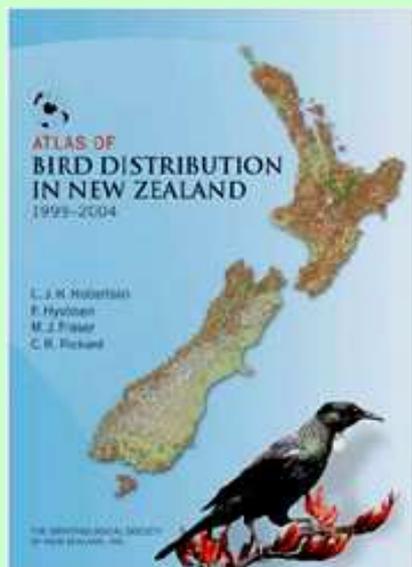
Members are entitled to:

- 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

Ordinary Member	NZ \$57.50
Full-time Student Member	NZ \$30
Family member *	NZ \$14.50
Institution/Group member	NZ \$115
Corporate Member	NZ \$290
Life Member (40 years and over)	NZ \$1,150

\* *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](mailto: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 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.