

# ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND (INC.)

## WANGANUI BRANCH



Birding Wanganui

PO Box 834  
Nelson 7040  
New Zealand

<http://www.osnz.org.nz/>

OSNZ Regional Representative: Peter Frost  
87 Ikitara Road,  
Wanganui 4500  
New Zealand

[birds.wanganui@xtra.co.nz](mailto:birds.wanganui@xtra.co.nz)

## *Newsletter September 2009*

### Highlights

- Thousands of Fairy Prions feeding offshore Wanganui in early August, along with Fluttering Shearwater, White-capped Albatross, Northern Giant Petrel, Cape Petrel, and Common Diving Petrel
- Re-sighting a Red-billed Gull, 28 years and 242 days after it was first banded
- Spotless Crake on the Matatara Stream
- An aberrant coloured Tui: 'brown', 'pastel', or 'isabel'?
- What is in a name? – the Nankeen Night Heron

### Wanganui Pelagic

On 8<sup>th</sup> August 2009, 11 intrepid souls ventured out to sea on a trip organised by Paul Gibson, to look for seabirds in the South Taranaki Bight off Wanganui. Relatively few seabirds have been recorded offshore up to now, partly because the shape of the coast and the shallowness of the water are not ideal for bringing seabirds close to shore. As far as we know, the area that has not been surveyed before from a boat, so what we would find was a mystery. As Dawne Morton's (Bird Rescue Manawatu-Wanganui) records show, some interesting species can be expected. Over the past year or so she has had Royal and Light-mantled Sooty Albatross; White-chinned Petrel, White-headed, and Blue Petrel; Common Diving Petrel; and Brown Skua. So, our expectations were high as we set off just before dawn in a not-quite pea green boat, the MS Vagabond, skippered by Brian Smith (Fluffy Duck Charters).



MS Vagabond, photographed leaving Wanganui on a previous occasion, in search of fish (photo: Paul Gibson). Those interested in coming on any future trips should note that the boat takes 13 paying passengers.

Fortunately for those wanting to retain their breakfasts, we had one of the calmest days of the year, with a light, 6 knot, north-easterly wind and a small 1 m swell. Unfortunately, such conditions are not ideal for species such as albatrosses and petrels, which use dynamic soaring to stay aloft with minimum expenditure of energy. (Dynamic soaring involves the birds diving into the troughs of waves and using the updraft created as the wave moves forward to give it lift, allowing it to gain height, from where it can then gain momentum to glide forwards and down into the next trough.) Under calm conditions, with little swell, the birds tend to sit on the water and therefore are harder to see, unless close by.

We sailed almost due west from the mouth of the Wanganui River, gradually leaving the coast behind. Apart from 700-800 Red-billed Gulls leaving the harbour at the same time as we did, and a few Black-backed Gulls which followed us for a while, little was seen initially. Once we approached the 30m depth contour, however, numbers and diversity of birds began to pick up: Fluttering Shearwater (individuals and small groups, the largest being 28 birds); Cape Petrel (ones and twos); Little Penguin (1); Common Diving-petrel (ones and twos); and four albatrosses sitting on the water, too far away to be positively identified, but thought to be White-capped. Fortunately, we had Brent Stephenson and Sav Saville onboard, two of New Zealand's top birders. Not only did they see most of the birds before we did, but they served as instant identification guides as well (we just added water).



Cape Petrels (*Daption capense*) were regular visitors to the boat throughout the day. These birds belong to the subspecies *D. c. australe*, which breeds on the Snares, Auckland, Campbell, Antipodes, Bounty and Chatham Island groups.

At about 08h30, 29 km due west of Wanganui and 12 km SSW of Waiinu, we came upon the first of a number of dense flocks of feeding seabirds, mostly prions and shearwaters. This one comprised an estimated 1500 Fairy Prions, 500 Fluttering Shearwater, up to 15 Cape Petrel, at least 1 Common Diving-petrel, and a solitary adult White-capped Albatross. The birds were feeding over a roiling mass of fish just below the surface, in water about 35m deep. You need to be clairvoyant to estimate the numbers of birds present in these whirling flocks, but counting the numbers of birds in subsets of photographs later suggests that our estimates were reasonable. In all, we came across six such groups during the day, the largest of which was about 15 km SSW of Waverley Beach. It comprised more than 5000 Fairy Prion and 200 Fluttering Shearwater. From time to time, the fish would break the surface, driving the birds into even more frenzied feeding. According to Brian Smith, this was a shoal of feeding kahawai, perhaps with kingfish below them.

Apart from the prions and shearwaters, few other species were recorded. Up to 15 Cape Petrel were counted at one of these flocks, along with couple of Northern Giant Petrel and 3 White-capped Albatross, both of which made brief fly-pasts, but did not stay. A few Common Diving-petrels were seen, but others could easily have been overlooked. One of the feeding flocks seen in the afternoon closer to the coast attracted about 200 Red-billed Gulls and a few Black-backed Gulls. As far as we could tell, there were only Fairy Prions in these flocks, although a couple of birds were seen that looked and flew differently. On both occasions, however, the birds were flying away from us, so details were impossible to get.



A small section of one of the larger flocks of Fairy Prions and Fluttering Shearwater foraging over a shoal of feeding kahawai.

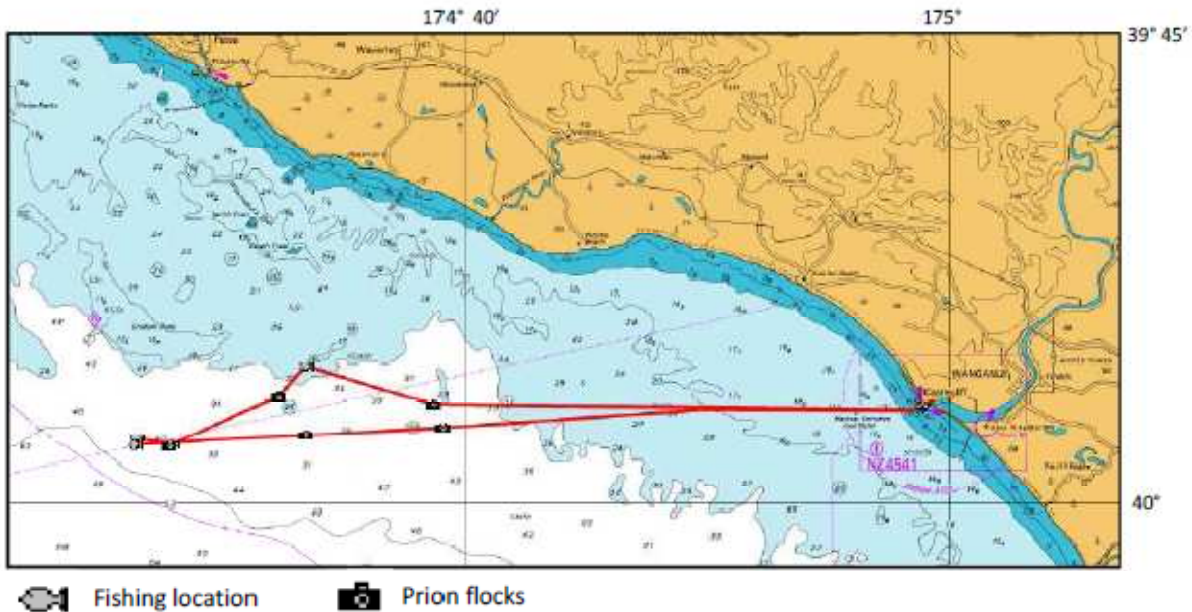
Outside these dense flocks, there were occasions when streams of prions flew purposefully past the boat, with up to 60 birds per minute being recorded on one occasion. In the morning, most of these birds were flying west to east, but the pattern seemed to reverse in the afternoon. Hundreds of thousands of Fairy Prion breed on islands at the entrance to the Marlborough Sounds. The birds start laying in mid-October, but would already be occupying and cleaning out their nest burrows.

In between chasing after these flocks of foraging prions, many on board were tempted to do some fishing, primarily for blue cod, although individual, tarakihi, sea perch, and barracouta were also caught. This activity brought up the highlight of the day, 11 White-capped Albatross sitting around the boat waiting to be fed. To attract the birds initially, we used fish remains ('chum') that Paul had kindly got from George's fish shop, together with bits from the fishes being caught by those who came to look for birds! (Some of the chum ended up on the back of Paul's vehicle before it even made it to the boat—watch out for albatrosses over Wanganui.)

The albatrosses did us proud, swimming close to the boat, squabbling over the offcuts and even a bright orange fish thrown to them whole. Watch out for Paul's prize-winning photograph of two albatrosses fighting over this fish, which one bird eventually managed to swallow whole. Even those of us with modest cameras managed to get reasonable photographs. Of course, the professionals—Paul, Brent, and Duncan Watson from Wellington—had a field day.



Adult White-capped Albatross feeding on a piece of discarded fish.



Track of the Wanganui Pelagic field trip, 8 August 2009.

Overall, the following birds were seen during the trip:

**White-capped Albatross** *Thalassarche steadi* 26 counted but some may have been recorded twice; 11 birds around the boat at one site; all adults.

**Fluttering Shearwater** *Puffinus gavia* 960 recorded but probably an underestimate. Over 200 birds seen on two occasions in feeding flocks with Fairy Prions.

**Common Diving-petrel** *Pelecanoides urinatrix* 11 counted but almost certainly under-recorded.

**Cape Petrel** *Daption capense* 37 counted but almost certainly includes birds counted more than once. Maximum number recorded at one location was 15.

**Northern Giant Petrel** *Macronectes halli* Recorded on 6 occasions but probably no more than 2-3 birds involved.

**Fairy Prion** *Pachyptila turtur* Over 10,000 birds estimated. No doubt some of these are duplicate counts but, equally, many more were uncounted as they flew past when the boat was moving. Maximum number estimated at one location was more than 5000.

**Little Penguin** *Eudyptula minor* 1.

**Black-backed Gull** *Larus dominicanus* 48 counted but probably more.

**Red-billed Gull** *Larus scopulinus* Up to 800 roosting in Wanganui harbour overnight 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> August. About 200 recorded at sea in one of the seabird feeding flocks closer to land; otherwise only scattered individuals.

**White-fronted Tern** *Sterna striata* 2.

The diversity of species was low, perhaps a reflection of the balmy conditions. Surprisingly, no Australasian Gannets were seen. The adults would be back at their breeding colonies, and may not range far at this time of the year.

We plan to do another trip sometime soon, possibly in early October, weather permitting. This may be a little late to catch the main wave of migrating Sooty Shearwater, returning from their wintering areas in the northern Pacific, but there should still be some to see, together with other species. If you want to come along, please contact Paul Gibson (06-345 5071) or Peter Frost (06 343 1648).

### A long-lived Red-billed Gull

One of a number of colour-banded Red-billed Gulls photographed by Lynne Douglas at Wharf Street in mid July has turned out to be a particularly long-lived individual. Dr Jim Mills, who has worked on the population biology of Red-billed Gulls since at least 1964, wrote to Lynne to tell her that bird MY-YGK (numbered ring E-167625, originally E-121375), was a female, originally banded as a chick on 25 November 1980 at Kaikoura. Lynne's last sighting of this individual was on 25 July 2009, 28 years and 242 days after it was banded. The oldest recorded Red-billed Gull is apparently a bird that lived for over 32 years. Overall, Lynne has recorded 6 colour-banded Red-billed Gulls this year (including one partial combination, due to only one leg being visible), with Peter Frost adding a seventh. We wait to hear more about their origins.



What does a 28-year old Red-billed Gull look like? This female, MY-YGK (number E-167625), originally banded as a chick in November 1980, was photographed by Lynne Douglas at the Castlecliff picnic area on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2009. Note how faded the yellow colour rings have become. They look almost white.

## In search of Spotless Crake

In November 2007, Paul Gibson, Clive Aim and Peter Frost managed to get Spotless Crake to respond to playbacks of its calls on Clive's property along the Matatara Stream, on the edge of Lismore Forest. The response was quite muted, however, suggesting that the birds perhaps had finished breeding. Last year, Paul and others focused on Christies' Lake in the neighbouring Makirikiri Valley, getting three birds to respond, but again not being able to see any. This year, in early September, we went back to Clive's property and played the recordings again, this time getting almost immediate and strong responses from three birds, primarily to the "purr" call. The birds give both "purr" and repeated "whit" calls in return. We selected a site that had a mix of raupo beds and patches of open water under a dense canopy of willow. With about 5 minutes of playing the calls, we enticed two birds out of a large bed of raupo to the smaller one. To get there, the birds had to cross a short stretch of open water, which they did using a variety of methods: swimming; climbing up into the willow and then walking across on a thin horizontal branch; and scuttling across in a flying run.

Once in the small raupo bed, the birds remained largely hidden but highly vocal, giving a mix of murmuring calls, intermittent "chuk" and repeated "whit" notes, and the challenging "purr" call, a fairly deep, drawn out, 4-second long trill. Occasionally, one or both birds would return to the main raupo bed, sometimes feeding on the way around the stems and roots of the flooded willows. It seemed that, as long as they had cover above them, they were reasonably relaxed.

We returned a few days later and Paul got himself into a position where he could look down through a narrow opening in the small raupo bed. This time only one bird responded to the playbacks, but it approached the loudspeaker closer than before, although seldom showing itself for more than a second at a time. Paul managed to get a couple of photographs, which show nicely the bird's sooty black plumage, tinged with chestnut on the wing coverts and upper back; the white bars near the tip of the under-tail coverts; and the red eye ring and red legs. In all, this is a tiny but handsome species, well worth the effort spent hunting it down.



Spotless Crake photographed by Paul Gibson along the Matatara Stream on 9 September 2009. This bird moved over 20 m to an isolated clump of raupo next to where playbacks of its calls were being played.

*Peter Frost and Paul Gibson*

## An aberrant coloured Tui

Carol and Brian McAvoy reported a strange-coloured Tui on their property along Wairere Rd on Bastia Hill. Rather than being iridescent black, the bird was a sooty brown with creamy brown belly and both upper- and under-tail coverts. The bird was active visiting a flowering gum and nearby kowhai. By all accounts it behaved and interacted normally with other Tui. Paul Gibson and Ormond Torr went there on 12<sup>th</sup> September and managed to get a number of photographs.

Neil Fitzgerald has a photograph on his website of a similarly coloured bird, which he calls 'leucistic' (see [www.neilfitzgeraldphoto.co.nz/gallery/displayimage.php?album=47&pos=35](http://www.neilfitzgeraldphoto.co.nz/gallery/displayimage.php?album=47&pos=35)). Hein van Grouw, in an article titled "Not every white bird is an albino: sense and nonsense about colour aberrations in birds" (*Dutch Birding* **28**: 79-89, 2006, available online at [http://www.vogelringschier.nl/DB28%282%2979-89\\_2006.pdf](http://www.vogelringschier.nl/DB28%282%2979-89_2006.pdf)) points out that terms such as albino and leucistic are frequently misused. In the article, he discusses the various genetic, nutritional, and biochemical factors influencing coloration in birds. Plumage colours in birds



are determined by the *melanines* (*eumelanin*, responsible for black, grey, and dark brown colours, and *phaeomelanin*, which produces reddish-brown colours; both are under genetic control) and *carotenoids* (red and yellow pigments derived from a bird's diet). He describes the factors that can produce colour variations, and provides some useful definitions of the different terms.

**Albino**—a total lack of both melanins, due to the complete lack of the enzyme tyrosinase, which catalyses the oxidation of tyrosine, the initial step in the formation of melanin.

**Leucism**—a partial or total lack of eumelanin and phaeomelanin in the feathers, due to an inherited disorder that prevents the deposition of these pigments in the feathers.

**Brown**—a qualitative reduction of eumelanin due to a mutation that causes incomplete oxidation of tyrosine, affecting eumelanin's appearance, but not its amount; phaeomelanin is not affected.

**Dilution**—a reduction of amount of melanin, producing either *pastel*-coloured plumage if both eumelanin and phaeomelanin are reduced, or *isabel*-coloured plumage if only the amount of eumelanin is reduced.

**Ino**—a marked qualitative reduction in both eumelanin and phaeomelanin, producing very pale brown feathers where they should be black.

**Schizochroism**—in which one or other of the two melanins is completely reduced, leading to *phaeo-schizochroism* (no eumelanin) or *grey schizochroism* (no phaeomelanin).

**Melanism**—an increase in melanins, producing a bird that is either black all over (*eumelanism*, due to an increase in eumelanin), or overall reddish-brown (*phaeomelanism*, due to an increase in phaeomelanin).

**Differently coloured**—all other inheritable colour aberrations, including *grizzle* (partially pigmented feathers) and *acromelanism* (temperature- and environment-dependent deposition of melanins).

Which of these do you think best fits Carol McAvoy's tui?

## More about Tuis

During this last winter we have had a very large number of Tui mostly in large winter flowering gum *Eucalyptus leucoxylon*, in one of which we and Colin and Robyn Ogle counted more than 20. Others were feeding in a nearby *Buckinghamia celsissima*. More recently we have been able to observe Tui not only in the flowering gum, but also in a range of other flowering plants including Red hot poker *Kniphofia uvaria*, Kowhai *Sophora sp.*, prunus *Prunus campanulata*, *Grevillea sp.*, *Banksia*, peach & other blossom trees, and camellias.

Tuis, bellbirds & other birds regularly run up the leafless branches of an ornamental apple *Malus trilobata*. For the first time on 24 August at 10:20 we saw a larger Tui feeding an insect to a smaller bird in the *Malus* - the smaller bird had been seen earlier following the larger bird. Tui have been flying very close to the ground and are ignoring our presence, often flying very close to us, and not moving when we walk by. On at least three occasions we have seen Tui actually on the ground. On the most recent occasion, the 26<sup>th</sup> August at 13:45, we saw a Tui land and eat insects from the litter below a *Viburnum carlesii*.

Several of our birds have the call of the Australian magpie as part of their repertoire.

*Ian and Jocelyn Bell*

In the interests of science, I believe that this is the first time a tui has been photographed in *Eucalyptus newbeyi*, a species from the south-west of West Australia. I bought it, under another name, as a 0.5 m shrub from Jim Campbell's father's nursery at Papaiti in 2001. As it grew tall and slender rather than bushy, I had my suspicions about the name on the plant. When it flowered, Chris Ecroyd, at what was then the NZ Forest Research Herbarium in Rotorua, re-identified it as *E. newbeyi*, only the second-known tree in NZ. The other is apparently at Christchurch.



Tui feeding on *E. newbeyi* nectar (Colin Ogle)



Tui feeding in a flowering gum (Ormond Torr)

*Colin Ogle*



## General sightings

**Royal Albatross:** a juvenile found on a dairy farm on Taylor Rd, near Sanson, on the 5th August (DM). **Giant Petrel:** a single bird seen off the mouth of the Wanganui River on 31<sup>st</sup> August during a westerly gale; it was tentatively identified as a possible Southern Giant Petrel on account of its markedly pale head (PF). **Sooty Shearwater:** 20-30 birds seen offshore on 31<sup>st</sup> August; identified on the basis of brownish plumage, pale flash in the underwing when the birds banked, and the characteristic quick flight consisting of rapid flapping alternating with long glides (PF). **Spotted Shag:** maximum number recorded this winter was 11 (25-27 June, PF). **Cattle Egret:** the group that has spent the past few winters on farms in the lower Whangaehu valley returned again this year; 14 birds were recorded on at the end of June (PG and PF); they were still there on 21<sup>st</sup> September (PF). This is an increase over the 8 birds recorded in 2008 and 5 in 2007, but is still below the numbers recorded 10-20 years ago (20-40 birds). **Nankeen Night Heron:** 8 birds still present at the Kauarapaoa (Kemp's Pole) roost site on 8<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> August (PF, PG and others). **Royal Spoonbill:** the number of birds on the Whanganui estuary fluctuated slightly from a maximum of 8 in early July to only 3 birds in mid September (PF, LD, RL). Seven birds seen on the Waitotara estuary on 16 September (RL). **Canada Goose:** 7 birds at Kaitoke Lake on 9<sup>th</sup> August, the first records for that locality (OT)/



"Love scene from Swan Lake" (Ormond Torr)



"Two heads are better than one" (Peter Frost)

**Bar tailed Godwit:** the first birds, 4 males and 3 females, photographed by LD, returned to the Wanganui estuary on 15<sup>th</sup> September; 4 of them stayed on until 19<sup>th</sup> September and then moved on (PF, IS). **Red Knot:** 4 birds seen on the Wanganui estuary on 11 September (PF), with 6 present the following day (PG), but they soon moved on; **Pied Oystercatcher:** singletons, pairs and trios recorded intermittently on the Wanganui estuary between end of June and mid September (PF, LD); one heard flying south at night 21<sup>st</sup> September (PF). **Black x Pied Stilt hybrid:** one seen on 12<sup>th</sup> September on the Wanganui estuary, showing a lot of black on head, hind neck and upper breast; part of a group of 25, most of which moved on overnight (PF). **Banded Dotterel:** flocks of birds continued to pass through the estuary during the first half of June—82 on 2<sup>nd</sup> July (PF), 37 on 11<sup>th</sup> July (PG), and 30-40 on 16<sup>th</sup> July (LD). **Black-billed Gull:** recorded intermittently on the Whanganui estuary—1, 11<sup>th</sup> August (PF); 9, 31<sup>st</sup> August (PF); and 2, 11<sup>th</sup> September (PF). **Kereru:** 100-200 birds present at Bushy Park, 29<sup>th</sup> August (PG). **Kaka:** during early September, members of the public reported a bird being seen regularly in the gardens along Roberts Avenue, Aramoho (JC). **Sulphur-crested Cockatoo:** 4 birds at Paloma Gardens, Denlair Rd, Fordell, the first seen there for some time, according to the landowner (PRT); a flock of cockatoos reportedly attracted on occasions by the calls of a pet bird on a farm on the Old Parapara Rd (PG, PF).

**Eastern Rosella:** towards the end of June, number of pairs seen regularly at Paloma Gardens, in contrast to infrequent sightings previously (PRT); one of the Bird Rescue volunteers reported seeing, for the second time, one, possibly two, pairs of Eastern Rosellas at the back of her property on Papaiti Rd, just outside Aramoho, on 30<sup>th</sup> July (DM); 4 birds at Ranana in mid August (FD); at least 4 birds seen on the old Parapara Rd, near the turnoff to Lismore Forest, and a single bird 1.8 km further up Matatara Rd (PG, PF). **Redpoll:** one in a garden in Kent Rd in July (AC); another in a garden in Montgomery Rd, Wanganui, 12 September (PRT); in both cases seen in birch trees. This is an uncommon bird in Wanganui, so records are always welcome. The few previous records are also from birds feeding on silver birch seeds (CO).

Observers names: Colin Ogle (CO), Dawne Morton (DM), Fiona Davis (FD), Ian Sutherland (IS), Jim Campbell (JC), Lynne Douglas (LD), Ormond Torr (OT); Paul Gibson (PG), Peter Frost (PF), Phil and Rosalind Thomsen (PRT), Ridgway Lythgoe (RL),

### **What is in a name? The Nankeen Night-heron**

What does the word 'Nankeen' mean? 'Nankeen' is the textile trade name for a durable brownish-yellow cotton originally manufactured in the city of Nanjing, China, but now imitated in various other countries. The characteristic tint of the cloth was due to the peculiar colour of the cotton from which the cloth was made (Encyclopaedia Britannica Outline [www.britannica.com/bps/search?query=nankeen](http://www.britannica.com/bps/search?query=nankeen)). No doubt the brownish-yellow colour of the night-heron's underbody feathers reminded someone of the cloth, hence the species' common name.



Nankeen Night-heron, showing the characteristic brownish-yellow underbody feathers (Peter Frost)

### **Monthly Talk**

#### *Back from the Dead: Rediscovery of the 'extinct' New Zealand Storm Petrel*

On Monday 28<sup>th</sup> September, Sav Saville, one of New Zealand's top birders, will talk about the rediscovery of the New Zealand Storm Petrel, a species once thought to be extinct. The talk will be given, as usual, in St Mary's Church complex, 1 Campbell St, starting at 7:30 pm. Off-street parking is available. Entrance on Guyton St. Everyone is welcome and entrance is free.

## 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)).

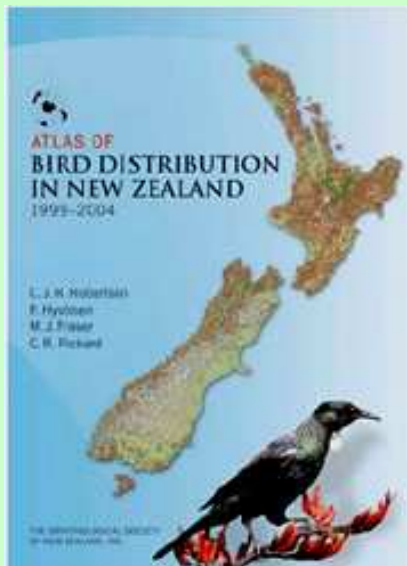
Members are entitled to:

- 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.