

Report on Birding Wanganui/OSNZ field trip to Koitiata lagoon, Turakina River mouth, and Kauarapaoa Stream/Whanganui River junction, Saturday 30 August 2008

Whangaehu Beach Road

Cattle Egret

Paul Gibson and Peter Frost, separately, counted eight Cattle Egret at their usual wintering site on Farm 44010 along Whangaehu Beach Road. The birds were clustered around the pond in front of the milking sheds. (Duncan Watson, travelling up from Wellington to join us at Turakina, counted five Cattle Egret in the pastures just outside Foxton Beach, another regular wintering site.)

Koitiata Lagoon

Paul Gibson, Duncan Watson and Peter Frost visited the Koitiata lagoon, at the mouth of the Turakina River, for an hour and a half on Saturday 30 August, arriving there at about 14h00. The lagoon has been greatly altered by a breach in the dunes opposite the ford from Koitiata township to the beach at the river mouth. The breach occurred during one of the storms that we experienced in July. Much of the woody debris that lined the beach on the seaward side of the river mouth had been carried in to the lagoon and distributed as far as 2 km down from the ford (south: Photo 1). It is highly likely that the damage to the dunes was done not only by the storm-driven waves but also by the scouring caused by the huge tree trunks and other woody debris carried on the waves and battering the dunes.



Photo 1. Wood debris now littering the basin of Koitiata lagoon. Water in the lagoon is now draining out to the Turakina River and sea through the channel in the foreground.

The beach seaward of the river mouth is now clear of wood for at least 800 m, the river mouth itself have been extended about 400 m further down the coast in a southeastly direction. Water in the lagoon is now draining out to the river, so that there is now much less water and considerably more exposed mud and sand in the basin of the lagoon. How long-term these changes will prove to be, and what impact they will have on the bird populations and fringing vegetation of the lagoon, especially the swamp on the northern side, remains to be seen. This is something that should be followed up.

Apart from numbers of Banded and Black-fronted Dotterel, other notable birds seen were a hybrid Pied x Black Stilt (Photo 2), 4 Black-billed Gulls, and a flock of 19 Bar-tailed Godwit. The hybrid stilt was notably aggressive towards the other (Pied) stilts, on a couple of occasions chasing them off over a distance of 3-5 m.



Photo 2. Hybrid Pied x Black Stilt photographed on the Koitiata Lagoon, 30 August 2008.

The following birds were recorded on the lagoon.

<i>Black Shag</i>	1 subadult
<i>White-faced Heron</i>	1 adult
<i>Grey Teal</i>	2 pairs
<i>Paradise Shelduck</i>	1 male
<i>Pied Stilt</i>	34, mostly in pairs or small groups; lots of interaction – birds calling and chasing each other around
<i>Pied x Black Stilt</i>	1 bird seen and photographed (see Photo 2)
<i>Banded Dotterel</i>	18 (minimum)
<i>Black-fronted Dotterel</i>	6 (minimum)
<i>Wrybill</i>	6 (minimum)
<i>Bar-tailed Godwit</i>	19 (at least 8 males; no marked birds)
<i>Black-billed Gull</i>	4 (3 immature, 1 adult)
<i>Caspian Tern</i>	1
<i>Skylark</i>	a number of birds singing in aerial display

Chaffinch

at least 10 birds feeding on the mudflats and among the woody debris

Starling

a flock of 20-25 birds flying around and feeding on the mud flats.

Whanganui River estuary

Duncan Watson and Peter Frost stopped briefly at the Whanganui Estuary, on their way through to Kauarapaoa, and recorded 5 ***Royal Spoonbill***, 2 ***Pied Oystercatcher***, 1 ***Pied Stilt***, and 3 ***Caspian Tern***. A number of ***Black-backed Gull*** were also present but were not counted. Paul Gibson had visited the estuary earlier in the day and had recorded the same species.

Kauarapaoa Stream

Paul Gibson, Duncan Watson and Peter Frost were joined by Bill Greenwood and Esther Williams to see the ***Nankeen Night-Heron*** that roost in a patch of forest above the Kauarapaoa Rd, close to the junction of the Kauarapaoa Stream and the Whanganui River. One bird was flushed at 17h10 and sat obligingly around for about 10 minutes while Paul, Duncan and Peter photographed it (Photo 3). Following this modelling session it flew off back into the roost in the forest, though not from where it was flushed originally.



Photo 3. Adult Nankeen Night-Heron flushed from its roosting site above the Kauarapaoa Rd, 30 August 2008.

The bird called a couple of times in flight when disturbed initially, but was otherwise quiet. The other birds in the roost were also generally silent, though we heard a couple of very brief croaks. Although we could not see them, and took care not to disturb them, some of the birds presumably could see us. These brief calls could have signified mild alarm.

Duncan, Ester and Peter stayed on after sunset (17h55) until the birds emerged from their roost. Two birds left at 18h20 (25 minutes after sunset), followed by 2, 3 and 1 bird in quick succession at 18h24, and the last (the bird that we had flushed originally) at 18h25 (30 minutes after sunset). The first and second groups of birds called loudly ('kraak') when leaving the roost. They all flew off down towards the Whanganui River, but it was too dark to see how far they went. We left at 18h30, by which time it was almost completely dark. Seibert¹ records Black-crowned Night Heron in the USA leaving a roost on average 16 and 18.5 minutes after sunset in two successive years. (Siegfried² also studied the time of departure of Black-crowned Night Heron from roosts in South Africa but I no longer have this reprint; the birds there also departed well after sunset, however.)

The total of nine birds at the roost is much greater than that previously recorded by Paul Gibson and Peter Frost (2-4 birds seen on previous occasions). This does not necessarily mean an increase in the number of birds roosting here because we did not stay until dark on these earlier occasions. More systematic monitoring of the birds at this roost site is warranted, as well as perhaps trying to locate their breeding site(s), if this can be done without disturbing them.

References

¹ Seibert, H.C. 1951. Light intensity and the roosting flight of herons in New Jersey. *Auk* **68**: 63-74.

² Siegfried, W. R. 1966. Time of departure from the roost in the night heron. *Ostrich* **37**: 235-236.

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