

CENSUS RECORDS OF GODWIT FOR FIRTH OF THAMES AND MANUKAU HARBOUR

By H. R. McKENZIE

The Eastern Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica baueri*) is one of the most numerous waders of the above two areas. Its being a migrant promotes interest in its comings and goings from and to Siberia and Alaska. The adults return in our spring showing remnants of red breeding dress, which, after arrival, fades away in a week or two. The young ones making their first migration are pale already. The dressing up for going away is more spectacular. In January some start to colour and when they leave in March and April the light under surface of the males has changed to almost a sunset red while the patterned upper side turns mostly to a warm brown. The females, which are larger than the males, are less brightly adorned. Some non-breeders stay with us over our winter, the numbers varying greatly from year to year. For these reasons we have taken our counts twice a year at each habitat; in the summer when we have the large population of "wintering" birds and in the winter when there are only the non-breeders present. This we have done since 1951, with some gaps in the record. Census dates are carefully chosen so that there will be a high tide to reduce the number of roosting places which have to be covered by the counting teams. Since 1951 hundreds of different people have taken part, many of them very frequently, and it is regretted that it is not practicable to list them by name. From Auckland, South Auckland and Waikato many travel long distances and even if they have been assigned to a place where they may see only a few birds they fully realise that they have made a valuable contribution in effecting a wide coverage of the high-tide haunts of the area. Now that enough years have elapsed it is intended that accounts of the various waders in turn should be written up. The South Island Pied Oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus finschi*) has been so dealt with already by R. B. Sibson (*Notornis* 13, 94), reference being made also to adjacent populations. In writing of the Godwit it will not be feasible to depart to any extent from the census results.

Its roosts are so numerous that "stab" counts of parts only are of little use and only a full survey at one time can provide adequate coverage. "Stab" counts, shown in parenthesis on the chart, are used only where they are larger than the census counts of the same season or when there has been no census. They may be of only one place, or several, but not all.

Firth of Thames, Summer Counts

The first count on 29/4/51 was really too late to be of use as migration would have been well on the way. The full summer number would most likely have been over 5000. The further summer counts have been remarkably regular. They were taken in November or December when the birds had settled in after their long migration. They tend to move about somewhat erratically in the later part of

Godwit Census Totals for Firth of Thames and Manukau Harbour
From Feb., 1951, to Dec., 1966

FIRTH OF THAMES			MANUKAU HARBOUR		
Date	Summer	Winter	Date	Summer	Winter
29- 4-51	3253 (Late count)		25- 2-51	6300	
24- 6-51		1290	6- 5-51		2312
2-12-51	4800 (5500 on 20-1-52)		1951-52	-----	
13- 7-52		797	14- 6- 52		1570
1952- 53	-----		1952- 53	-----	
2- 8-53		1906	14- 6-53		4829
13-12-53	9154		22-11-53	9433	
1954		-----	1954		-----
1954- 55	-----		1954- 55	----- (7000 on 11-12-54)	
26- 6-55		1109	24- 7-55		1815
4-12-55	5924		1955- 56	-----	
17- 6-56		149	8- 7-56		4575
25-11-56	8204		4-11-56	6500 (7000+ 11-1-57)	
1957		-----	1957		-----
1957- 58	----- (5000 on 9-2-58)		1957- 58	----- (6000 on 22-2-58)	
1958		-----	1958		-----
1958- 59	----- (3500 on 13-12-58)		1958- 59	----- (5000 on 28-9-58)	
1959	(690 on 13-8-59)	-----	21- 6-59		6317
6-12-59	9215		8-11-59	14780 (16000 on 1-11-59)	
1960		-----	10- 7-60		3557
27-11-60	9650		4-12-60	15283	
2- 7-61		900	30- 7-61	(7500 on 30-8-61)	3650
26-11-61	11290		10-12-61	12430	
24- 4-62	(690 on 19-8-62)	243	22- 7-62		1380
2-12-62	6765		16-12-62	13385	
14- 7-63		502	23- 6-63		1458
8-12-63	5522		3-11-63	16748	
17- 5-64		410	14- 6- 64		1209
8-11-64	8490		22-11-64	11048	
4- 7-65		582	1- 8-65		1683
14-11-65	8110		12-12-65	17314	
24- 7-66		808	5- 6-66		1326
4-12-66	8119		11-12-66	10280	

their term here. The census count of 4800 on 2/12/51 for the whole area compares badly with the count of 5500 on 20/1/52 on only a part of the area. On 2/12/51 a flock of say 1000 birds could have been tucked away in an unusual place but even so there should have been many more than 5500 in the whole area on 20/1/52. Human error could account for this but an odd movement of the nature of those described later may have caused it. The "stab" counts of 9/2/58 and 13/12/58 would almost certainly represent only part of the total.

Firth of Thames, Winter Counts

These show considerable variation. No concern need be felt about this as it is to be expected that differing seasons must bring about a variation in the proportion of non-breeding birds. The small counts, being winter ones, may have occurred because many of the birds were staying far back in the sodden fields, where they will sometimes feed irrespective of whether their tideflat feeding grounds are available or not. A big population of over-wintering non-breeders may indicate a successful breeding season in the Arctic; and small numbers a poor one.

Manukau Harbour, Summer Counts

The numbers in the first three counts are on the average only about half the size of those of the last eight. It is most unfortunate that so much is missing from the upper part of the chart. For the seasons 1957-58 and 1958-59 the scheme went into recess. One attempt was completely wiped out by torrential rain. The teams grimly tackled their tasks but just could not see the birds. The records for the seasons 1953-54 and 1954-55 and some others were lost in being passed from one to another. The larger numbers from 8/11/59 to 11/12/66 are very satisfactory. From 22/11/64 counts have been taken at Whitford for the Manukau Census because of the frequent traffic from one coast to the other. The summer counts are:— 22/11/64, 1820; 12/12/65, 2; a "stab" count on 8/10/66 of c.1000 and a census count on 11/12/66 of 2200. The Whitford tallies of 1820 and 2200 show that its inclusion is necessary even though there are few or none there some years.

Manukau Harbour, Winter Counts

These show great variation. It is unlikely that birds have been counted twice over. On the other hand some could be missed owing to their changing to an unknown inland roost or haunt as already suggested. Also as already mentioned, there is no reason to believe that numbers should be anywhere near the same each year. Whitford counts were 8 on 14/6/64, 80 on 1/8/65 and 25 on 5/6/66.

Unusual Occurrences

(1) Feb. 1932 approx. Geo. H. and C. V. White on farm on top of hills, south of Clevedon, at evening, saw a great stream of Godwit of several thousands flying over them from south to north. As this route would have brought them up through the centre of the North Island it seems more likely that they had left the Miranda coast, swung in an arch to avoid the higher coastal and Hunua ranges and were then, if they kept on in a straight line, heading for Whitford.

(2) Mid-Feb., 1940. Geo. H. White, at 6.30 to 7 p.m., while travelling by car saw, all the way from Kirikiri Hill, near Papakura, to Waiau Pa, via Karaka, south Manukau Harbour, several great flocks flying roughly east, which could take them from south Manukau Harbour to Miranda. It was of course too early for migration.

(3) 12-18/3/43. Clevedon estuary. I received four separate estimates of c.5000. This was most likely a migratory move as the local population up to then had been 400.

(4) 19/3/49. Miranda. 20,000 to 25,000 Godwit and Knots, the latter being in the majority, all doing pre-migration flying. Mixed parties such as this are not recorded on the chart.

(5) 6/11/49. Off wharf at Maraetai Beach, early rising tide, c.600 flying east along Clevedon coast of Tamaki Strait. This was puzzling. Were they flying from Whitford or northern Manukau Harbour via Whitford to Clevedon estuary or to Miranda?

(6) 14/4/57. Mangakino, Waikato River, c.40 grey winterers flying north along Maraetai Lake (Hydro). This is far inland and could only have been related to a long flight.

(7) 1/3/64. Oruarangi, just south of Puketutu Island, north Manukau Harbour, c.10,000, with c.800 knots, flying to Whitford, which was proved by following them by road. The movement is known to be an old habit of late in the season and used to be exploited by shooters posted on hilltops when a strong wind kept the birds low. This was $1\frac{3}{4}$ hours before high tide in the Manukau so had there been a census that day and Whitford not visited these would have been missed. Strangely enough this flight was of $12\frac{1}{2}$ miles, whereas they could have gone to Mangere Airport, $3\frac{3}{4}$ miles, Puhinui, $6\frac{1}{2}$ miles, or Karaka Shellbank, $8\frac{1}{4}$ miles. At Whitford they merely rested on the partly exposed sandy flats, the tide being about three hours earlier than Manukau, and then flew back as the tide fell on the Manukau side.

It is to be noted that all except one of these "Unusual Occurrences" have happened close to the outward migration time. This is well clear of both our summer and winter censuses but when such odd happenings occur at this season it can surely be expected that lesser ones can occur occasionally at the census times, thus accounting for variations which may otherwise be attributed to human error. The writer is satisfied that the good work of members has resulted in a good coverage of these two important godwit habitats.



SHORT NOTE

TURNSTONES AT SEA

On 27/11/66 I was on passage from Suva to Lyttelton in M.V. Matua. At 1630 hrs. an unusual and unexpected bird-call was heard, and I found that not one but three Turnstones (*A. interpres*) were accompanying the ship. They flew about for some time without coming on board. They were last seen at 1800 hrs., when the ship's position was 29° 26' S, 175° 42' E.

— JOHN JENKINS