

## SIGHTING OF GRASS WHISTLE-DUCKS

A note has been received of the sighting of a flock of 12 unusual ducks in January 1975, at Little Wanganui, about 16 km south of Karamea, Northwest Nelson. This was referred to the Rare Birds Committee, which has confirmed the sighting as a record of the Grass Whistle-Duck or Plumed Whistling Duck (*Dendrocygna eytoni*).

Linda-Jane Stopforth of Karamea, reported that the ducks were present for about 10 days, feeding on grass seedheads and fossicking about on the ground; they roosted in two gum trees. She described them as having long necks and long pink legs with webbed feet. "Their feathers were grey with black tips, breast feathers seemed slightly striped. They had large side feathers cream in colour and very unusual, black bills and orange-pink eyes."

This is the fourth record of the species in New Zealand, but the first for nearly 80 years. Previous occurrences were Thames (1871), Kaitangata (14 birds, 1871), Ashburton (3 birds, 1894-6). (*Annotated Checklist of the Birds of New Zealand*, OSNZ 1970: 36). Their arrival here is no surprise considering the distribution given by Slater (*Field Guide to Australian Birds — Non-Passerines*, 1971: 227): "Tropical Australia but isolated breeding colonies also occur inland as far south as the Murray River, and nomadic flocks can be seen at times almost anywhere in south-eastern Australia." It appears that one of these nomadic flocks crossed the Tasman in January; it may still be somewhere in New Zealand.

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## BLACK-FRONTED DOTTEREL IN THE MANAWATU

The 1974 Labour Day Weekend Field Study Course in the Manawatu was organised primarily to study the spread of the Black-fronted Dotterel in the Manawatu, and secondarily to survey local swamps for Spotless Crake and Marsh Crake.

The course extended from 8.00 p.m. Friday 25 October to noon on Monday 28 October, most meetings being held in the Teachers' College Science Department to organise field work and report back. On Saturday evening Sylvia Reed gave an illustrated talk on the Galapagos Islands, and on Sunday evening a buffet tea was enjoyed at the home of two of our local members.

The field work was highly successful. The Black-fronted Dotterel survey was conducted on the Manawatu, Oroua and Rangitikei Rivers (see table for details). Several Black-backed Gull colonies were found on the rivers. Using tape-recorded calls to lure the birds, Spotless Crakes were heard or seen at four localities and Marsh Crake

at one (Lake Koputara). Lake Pukepuke was not included in the survey, but both species are known to be present there. A highlight of the visit to Lake Koputara was a Little Shag colony with 70 nests. Visits to the Rangitikei Estuary revealed: Spurwing Plover (2), Golden Plover (3), Banded Dotterel (9), Wrybill (2), Bartailed Godwit (21), Turnstone (1), Knot (38) and Red-necked Stint (4).

The Black-fronted Dotterel was first recorded in the Manawatu in 1955 (*Notornis* 6: 185) but was not again reported west of the Manawatu Gorge until 1971-72, when a nest was found near Longburn by J. Andrews, and birds were reported near Palmerston North and Tiakitahuna (12 seen by K. Cook). In July 1972, twelve were seen at Himatangi Beach on a sand-basin behind the foredunes (B. McConkey). Several surveys during 1968-70 had failed to locate any Black-fronted Dotterel west of the Manawatu Gorge.

The Manawatu population of Black-fronted Dotterels is presumably an overflow from Hawkes Bay. In October 1967, 16 were counted on the Manawatu River, all between Dannevirke and Hopelands Bridge. In November/December 1972, 32 were counted on this 13 mile section: 9 from Hopelands Bridge to Ngawapurua Bridge (6 miles), 12 from Ngawapurua Bridge to Ballance Bridge (8 miles) and 20 from Ashhurst to Fitzherbert Bridge (12 miles). One was seen on the Mangahao River and 2 near Longburn. The lower Manawatu and other rivers west of the Gorge were not surveyed systematically.

The 1974 Labour Day Weekend results are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1 — Numbers of birds counted 26-27/10/74, except Feilding-Kopane which was November/December 1974. Figures in brackets are for November/December 1972. If a section of river was incompletely surveyed this is indicated by a + after the number of birds seen.

River	Section	Miles	Black-fronted Dotterel	Banded Dotterel	Pied Stilt
Rangitikei	Kakariki - Bulls	7	3	55	33
	Bulls - midway	6	7	27	32
	Midway - estuary	7	7	24	34
Oroua	Apiti Bridge - Barrow Rd	15	0	0	2
	Feilding - Kopane	8	9 +	12 +	100 +
Manawatu	Ashhurst - Fitzherbert Bridge	12	17 (20)	55 (59)	47 (127)
	Fitzherbert Bridge - Hamiltons Line	9	24 (2+)	42 (20+)	7 (106+)

The rivers were all running high during much of 1974 and by 26 October they had only just dropped to normal levels. They were up again on Monday (28th). The 1974 census figures may, therefore, be somewhat low, as birds may not have settled on the river.

The 1972 figures for late November-December are higher for all three species on the Ashhurst-Palmerston North section, but most markedly for Pied Stilt, many of which were seen on the paddocks (some with half-grown chicks) at the time of the 1974 census. One Black-fronted Dotterel was observed on a paddock on 28 October.

The 1974 census did not cover all the suitable habitats in the Manawatu and it was perhaps too early in the season for an accurate comparison with the 1972 figures, but it did serve to indicate the extent of the spread of the Black-fronted Dotterel since their presumed penetration of the Manawatu Gorge about 3 years previously. Breeding on the Oroua River was proved by R. Wasley who photographed nesting birds in November 1974.

Out of the breeding season, Black-fronted Dotterel have appeared in flocks at a variety of places e.g., Centennial Lagoon, Palmerston North (15 in March 1973), Hamilton's Lagoon (25 in August 1974), L. Pukepuke (8 in April 1974). Censusing would appear to be more satisfactory during the breeding season when the birds are largely confined to the river beds.

Our thanks are due to all members who co-operated in the census work, and all who helped to make the 1974 Labour Day Weekend such a success.

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SEASONAL VARIATION IN ESTUARY USE BY  
BROWN TEAL (*Anas castanea chlorotis*)  
ON GREAT BARRIER ISLAND

My earlier observations on feeding behaviour of Brown Teal (*Anas castanea chlorotis*) on Great Barrier Island (Weller 1974: *Notornis* 21: 25-35) provided some data on the distribution of teal according to habitat. Estuaries were not only used intensively but feeding was rhythmic in response to tides. A major portion of this post-breeding population was so tied to estuarine life that I wanted to gather additional data on their behaviour in another season. Three days were spent (27-29 Aug. 1974) on Great Barrier Island in search of Brown Teal, and my observations were so at variance with earlier notes that they seem worth recording.

*Habitat Selection and Numbers:*

In February of 1973 (7-14 Feb.), about 34 Brown Teal regularly used estuaries of the Port Fitzroy area. In August of 1974, I searched the estuaries in the Fitzroy area for teal but not one bird was seen during mornings, evenings, or after dark in spite of favourable low tides. Local residents had noted the absence of teal but had no knowledge of the timing of the seasonal variation.