

National Red-billed Gull Survey, Phase II: October 2015-January 2016

In 2014, Birds New Zealand, working with the Department of Conservation, initiated a national survey of the red-billed gull, with the objective of establishing more precisely its current population status. Information collected over the past few decades, much of it anecdotal, suggests that the species has experienced overall a substantial population decline, notwithstanding an apparent regional increase in Otago. Because of this, and despite its seemingly still-large population, the red-billed is now classified as Nationally Vulnerable, with an expected ongoing population decline of 50–70 % over the next three generations.

Phase 1, carried out during the 2014/15 breeding season, was a scoping survey, designed to check all 166 colony sites listed by Lou Gurr and Fred Kinsky in a paper published in *Notornis* in 1965, and locate any new sites. In the end, only 99 (60 %) of the pre-1965 sites were resurveyed, just under half of which (47 %) were still active. Most of the unsurveyed sites were on offshore islands, which are more difficult for members of the public to reach. Overall, active colonies were reported at 162 sites across mainland New Zealand with a further 19 in the Chatham Islands. Whether any of the ‘new’ sites were active in the past, but had been overlooked, or whether they reflect a shift in the locus of breeding is an open question at this stage. A report on the results of Phase 1 of this study is available [here](#).

Of the sites listed in 1965 that are still active today, just over 40% appeared to support fewer pairs than before, while 30 % are marginally bigger. Interpreting these changes in colony size is complicated, however, because we only asked for order-of-magnitude estimates of the number of breeding pairs (although more precise figures were sometimes provided). It is also unclear if the estimates excluded or included the number of non-breeding birds at a colony. The same shortcoming almost certainly applied to the figures reported by Gurr and Kinsky (1965). This is one problem that we want to overcome in this year’s survey by providing everyone with clear guidelines on what to count and how best to do it.

Phase 2 of the national red-billed gull survey will start in October 2015. The aim is to obtain an overall estimate of the size of the red-billed gull population breeding in New Zealand. It will also incidentally establish the location and size of active colonies, allowing us to set up a more systematic monitoring programme to determine what long-term population changes, if any, are occurring.

A list of the sites that need censusing is given [here](#). This includes those sites listed by Gurr and Kinsky but which were not checked last year, as well as those additional sites reported in the Ornithological Society of New Zealand’s Classified Summarised Notes between 1972 and 2006. Guidelines for censusing these colonies are available [here](#). You can also download a .kml file [here](#), which you can open in Google Earth (which you can download [here](#)).

If you would like to contribute to this survey, the key points to note are:

- The aim is to obtain an overall estimate of the size of the red-billed gull breeding population; that is, **the number of active breeding pairs**, where one nest = one breeding pair (both members of a pair incubate).

- **We therefore need you to count the number of active nests** (i.e. indicated either by an incubating or brooding bird or by chicks in a nest). Ways of doing this are given in the guidelines [here](#).
- Ideally, colonies should be surveyed as close as possible to the peak of egg laying, likely to be sometime between mid-October and mid-November. Counts done before or after the peak are likely to produce underestimates. Nevertheless, any counts are better than none, so please send us what you have, irrespective of when the counts were done.
- Please support all counts, even ground and scan counts, with digital photographs of the colony. Where possible, take both panoramic (~70 mm focal length or equivalent) and high-resolution, overlapping, close-up (~300 mm focal length or equivalent) photographs of colonies. These will provide a permanent record and allow us to check.
- If needs be, subdivide the colony into more manageable counting units, using topographic or vegetation features as reference points. These should be sketch mapped.
- In addition to a count of the number of breeding pairs (active nests), please provide geographic coordinates for the colony (latitude/longitude or NZTM 2000 coordinates: see <http://www.topomap.co.nz/>); the name of the site, if known; the date and time of the observation(s); prevailing weather conditions; the observer(s) name(s); photographs of the colony; and, where necessary, a sketch map of the area, showing from where the counts were made.

Please send your observations either to Peter Frost (email: birds.wanganui@osnz.org.nz) or to Graeme Taylor (email: gtaylor@doc.govt.nz). We will be happy to answer any queries.

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