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Birds New Zealand

Otago Region Newsletter 1/2017 January 2017

Black-billed gulls in Balclutha



In early September Suzanne pointed out that black-billed gulls were accumulating on a gravel island on the river in Balclutha, and looked like they were contemplating breeding. When I checked them out on 10th September there were in excess of 750 birds present, including some that looked like they were already sitting on nests (though in hindsight they may have just been pretending!) At this stage I was viewing the colony

from the Kaitangata Highway, which was not ideal, so I negotiated access (readily granted) to a garden overlooking the river, from where I could photograph the birds without being in the full public gaze. I learnt at this stage that the Otago Regional Council (ORC) were planning on carrying out vegetation control on the island, so I got in touch and asked if they could postpone the spraying until breeding had finished. Again they were very cooperative.

So from then on I made regular visits to my vantage point, taking photographs through my telescope so that I could count at leisure. By 17th September birds definitely were sitting on nests, and eggs were visible. The peak count of apparently occupied nests (AONs) was 880 on 6th October, the same day as the first chick was seen.



By this stage I was keeping a nervous eye on water levels, as in 2015 at about the same date the colony was washed out after a period of heavy rain. Another threat was from the black-backed gulls. In the early days there were just a few immature birds hanging around the periphery of the colony, but these were generally seen off by the adult black-bills. However when the chicks started to appear, adult black-backs took arrived; I didn't witness it myself, but I'm sure they helped themselves to a

few easy meals. (Although black-backed gulls are present in the vicinity of many black-billed colonies, the Balclutha site is close to the landfill, hence there is an unnaturally large number present.) As the chicks became more mobile, they migrated from the bare gravel to the vegetation, presumably for protection (or maybe just to make it harder to count them!)



The island kept its head above water until 16th November, by which time most eggs had hatched, and many of the young birds were competent swimmers, and a few were able to fly. The island was almost completely submerged, so the birds drifted off downstream and across to the mainland, corralled by the adults, and took up residence at various sites along the river, including a timber loading yard by the railway, and the adjacent river bank. At this point Suzanne used social media to alert dog walkers in particular to be aware of the vulnerable birds on the river bank, and people by and large took notice, and were generally interested in what was going on.

I was not able to get an accurate count of chicks, but there were somewhere in excess of 500 before the colony was flooded, and counts after the dispersal suggested that a large percentage survived this event.

The Balclutha birds were earlier than any other colony in Southland and Otago, so were not able to be included in the aerial survey carried out this summer, as the young birds were already running around by the time other colonies were ready to be flown over. They were also unusual in that they were nesting in an urban area, though this in itself did not appear to have any adverse effect on breeding success. In addition to the black-bills, about a dozen pairs of red-billed gulls also nested on the fringes of the colony, but I am not aware of these raising any young.

Postscript: In late December I found a further colony about 300m downstream, presumably late birds that had been washed out from the original colony. At the time of going to press there were 14 well grown but still fluffy chicks (hopefully able to swim, given the weather forecast!)

Thanks to Colin & Beatrice Pratt for the access to their property, and to ORC for their cooperation in delaying the vegetation control.

Richard Schofield

Otago Summer Wader Count 27 November 2016

| | Karitane | Blueskin Bay | Aramoana | Harbour | Papanui Inlet | Hooper's Inlet | Catlins | Total 2016 | Total 2015 |
|------------------------|----------|--------------|----------|---------|---------------|----------------|---------|------------|------------|
| Pied Oystercatcher | 10 | 100 | 22 | 70 | 2 | 23 | 43 | 270 | 566 |
| Variable Oystercatcher | 3 | 7 | 4 | 14 | 3 | 12 | 2 | 45 | 67 |
| Pied Stilt | 35 | 2 | 3 | | 12 | 40 | 5 | 97 | 73 |
| Banded Dotterel | | 1 | 35 | | | | 7 | 43 | 7 |
| Spur-winged Plover | 3 | | 2 | 5 | 9 | 10 | 1 | 30 | 31 |
| Bar-tailed Godwit | | 520 | 206 | | | 420 | 172 | 1318 | 1723 |
| Turnstone | | | | | | | 1 | 1 | |

This wader count was a total contrast of last year. when the count was carried out in one of the calmest days. Not this count. Very strong NW winds, haze and the odd shower. We were not alone. According to Adrian Riegen, it affected most counts in the country. The weather affected the numbers: Pied Oystercatchers, who normally are sunning on the roofs of the sheds at Port Chalmers, were just not there. The number of the Godwits was down. Most likely they were hiding out of the wind.

Peter Schweigman

Royal Spoonbills can live for at least 20 years

At the November meeting we heard about a banded spoonbill that had been seen and photographed by Bill Cash at Wairau Bar and found to have been banded over 20 years ago as a chick by Bill Cash himself at the Wairau lagoon colony. This is the oldest recorded Royal Spoonbill.

Lei Zhu and Yue Cui photographed a spoonbill feeding at Hoopers Inlet on 22 November 2016 at 5.07pm. Lei commented-“the bird we saw at the weekend was banded.”

Their photograph was so clear that, when enlarged on the computer, we could read the number on the metal band: 031615 (record of colour bands: red/blue/metal; yellow/green) and the faded colour bands on right leg corresponded to yellow over green. On the left leg, a touch of red behind the metal band could also be seen (probably had slipped from upper tarsus).



Peter Schweigman banded this spoonbill (031615;) when a chick on Green Island on 27th December 1999. This bird is the oldest Royal Spoonbill recorded for the Otago birds, at 17 years and 10 months (previously oldest in Otago was 15 years.). Records document that it was seen in Kaikorai

Estuary two times after fledging by Peter, then around Hoopers Inlet in 2005 and now again in 2016. So keep your eyes open for banded birds and take photographs.

Another report was received recently from Nelson of a banded spoonbill with yellow/red on left leg, but insufficient other information to confirm identity.

Royal Spoonbills also made the ODT with a photo of one in the Waters of Leith; with some commentary obtained from Mary Thompson and freely interpreted (somewhat incorrectly) by the reporter. But at least these birds catch peoples' eye.

Mary Thompson

Return to Mopanui

Mary, Sue and Andrew have made 3 return visits to Mopanui to look for any evidence of robins breeding. Of the 4 robins recorded from our initial trip on 5 November, only two were seen again; one still singing in the middle section and another at the far end of the track and no luck spotting any juveniles or females. We should repeat the survey next season.

However, juvenile rifleman, brown creeper, bellbird and tomtits moving around in family groups confirmed that these species are breeding successfully. On Dec 30 at least 6 juvenile tomtits were seen.

On November 22, seemingly in response to playback of robin calls in the macrocarpa patch along the track 4 Shining Cuckoo came flying in. Sue and Mary had close-up views of adults looking resplendent in their cream and green striped chests and flitting from perch to perch and calling the descending 'twse-ew' notes of their song and looking very excited; this lasted for several minutes and then they flew away and all was calm again. We were surprised by this display as we weren't aware that adult cuckoos flocked together in spring. On another occasion we had seen

several young birds together feeding on woolly caterpillars in February, prior to migrating. However, some research using HANZAB indicated several reports dating from 1950s and 1980s of communal displays in which up to 10 cuckoos gather in spring to display excitedly, although the function is still uncertain.

Mary Thompson

Juvenile Blue Ducks at Glenorchy end of Routeburn Track.

Our neighbours reported seeing Blue Ducks (two adults and 5 young) at the bridge at the start of the Routeburn from the Glenorchy end, so Sue and I decided to take a trip up there to see them as we had never seen them in the wild before. Tuesday 10th January was one of the fine, relatively calm days of summer and we spent the day watching the ducks on the Routeburn. When we arrived, a quick scan up and down the river from the bridge revealed no birds so we did a detour from the picnic area at the road end, in the bush on the true right bank, seeing mohua, robins, tomtits, riflemen, brown creeper and one yellow-crowned parakeet. Back at the river bank near the bridge by 11.30 we again scanned the rocks and this time Sue spotted something which through binoculars were two Blue ducks resting in the sun on top of a large rock 100m downstream – easily missed. We had our lunch waiting for them to move. At about 12.15pm they started preening, moving around, having a short swim then back on the rocks. A black-backed gull flew up-stream and the ducks prostrated themselves flat on the rock in response. By 12.45pm, the action started. Both ducks swam across the river to the shady side and started heading upstream. They were feeding systematically, just below the waterline on the rocks and banks along the river, occasionally up-ending but mostly just their heads under water. In this position they looked like ‘grey rocks’. We watched them for about 1 ½ h as they worked their way up-stream against fairly strong rapids and gliding into eddies behind the large rocks where they continued to feed. Once they had moved about 300m we followed them on the road, but lost sight of them. We thought these two were the adults but when we studied the photos realised that they were juveniles; adults have a very bright yellow iris and more chestnut breasts than the young. Sue walked back in the river but didn’t spot them again. However, I took the road and was back on the bridge by 3.00pm and looking down below saw on the gravel bank three young Blue Duck sleeping together right out in the open – no idea where they had been previously. They ‘woke’ at about 3.30pm, spent about 10 minutes preening and testing the water, then they too set off on a systematic thorough feeding session heading up-stream for 2 hours. At a large rapid before the river shallows they turned around and after mucking around for 30 min. headed downstream surfing the rapids and came back to the gravel bank under the bridge. They had a wash and preen then settled to rest together. When we left the area at 7.30pm the three of them were again setting out on a feeding trip up-stream. Perhaps we should have waited until dusk to see

whether the parent birds appeared. The literature about Blue Ducks describes the parents as very attentive when the young are small but then letting the young fend for themselves when they are near fledging.



Mary Thompson and Sue Galloway.

Ornithological snippets

This summary covers reports from mid-November to mid-January. A **Fiordland Crested Penguin** took up residence near the St Clair salt water pool on 10th January, presumably to moult, but was moved to a safe place a few days later after finding its way under a parked car. Lei Zhu counted 140 **Little Penguins** at Taiaroa Head on 26th October. Contender for most unexpected bird of the period was an immature **Wandering Albatross**, found in a paddock at Clydevale on 5th January. It was taken into custody by Doc, and released on the Catlins coast. Meanwhile a, still unexpected but in a more favourable habitat, was a **Light-mantled Sooty Albatross** seen by Mark Ayre from a boat off Taiaroa Head on 12th December. Mark also saw 2 **White-chinned Petrel**, 11 **Salvin's Mollymawk**, 2 **Arctic Skuas** and a **Southern Giant Petrel**, among others. Laura McDuffie also saw a **White-chinned Petrel**, from Aramoana on 2nd January, along with a **Fluttering Shearwater**.



Janet Ledingham came across this **Royal Spoonbill** on the 27th December in one of the bays just before Aramoana. “What do you reckon would have caused the beak damage? I have seen a similar injury once before. The bird still seemed to be feeding happily.” Any suggestions to Janet.

Rachel Hufton was at Cromwell Bowling Centre doing a first aid course on 22nd November. Whilst having lunch at the back of the building by the

lake she had wonderful close observation of a **New Zealand Falcon**. It flew over the lake then back to her & perched on a rock while she got a lovely view. It was probably a male. 3 **Scaup** were present also.

At Sinclair wetlands David Riddell heard a **Marsh Crake** on 15th November

The **Coots** at Ross Creek Reservoir have again bred successfully. On 26th December Alan Baker saw two adults and three juveniles there. Meanwhile Lesley Gowan saw **Coot** with 3 chicks at Sullivans Dam, Mt Cargill area, on 18th February. On 21st January Lei Zhu photographed a hybrid **Black/Pied Stilt** at Tomahawk Lagoon.



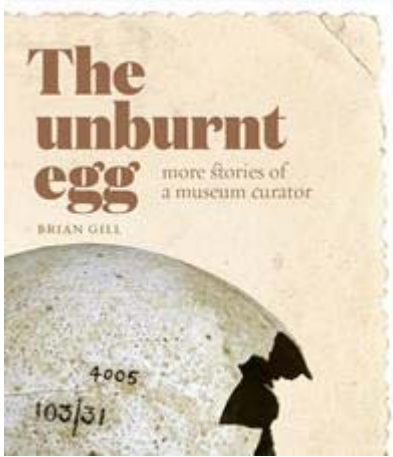
Kyle Lindemer reported a **Pomarine Skua** chasing a Kelp Gull from Cape Saunders Road on 3rd January, while an **Arctic Tern** was seen at Brighton on 27th November by another visiting birder Markus Craig. On 2nd January Alan Baker saw a family of **Riflemen**, with young still being fed, in the Dunedin Town Belt. Finally two paddocks near Owaka held at least 151 & 181 **Song Thrushes** on 7th January – at least one of the paddocks contained freshly harvested oat stubble.

Please send any interesting sightings to richard@pcconnect.co.nz for inclusion in the next newsletter

compiled by **Richard Schofield**

Items of ornithological interest added to Dunedin Public Libraries' collections in 2016

It's been a fairly meagre year for bird books, so I've included one or two I might have left out in a more bountiful year.



The Unburnt Egg : more stories of a museum curator, by Brian Gill

Brian Gill was the curator of birds at the Auckland War Memorial Museum for many years.

Birds, by Julie Beer

The Cuckoo and the Warbler : a true New Zealand story, by Kennedy Warne

The Fantail : extraordinary aviator, by Neil Page

The Genius of Birds, by Jennifer Ackerman [available in print and as an audiobook]

H is for Hawk, by Helen Macdonald [available in standard print, large print and as an e-audiobook]

Penguin Bloom : the odd little bird who saved a family, by Cameron Bloom and Bradley Trevor Greive [Penguin is in fact a magpie]

Rivers Rare : protecting braided rivers : the first 25 years of Project River Recovery, by Neville Peat

A Sky full of Birds : in search of murders, murmurations and Britain's great bird gatherings, by Matt Merritt

Wild Island : a year in the Hebrides, by Jane Smith

Alan Baker

Hawksbury Lagoon

I was accused of being a Twitcher last week. One of those camo clad middle aged/elderly men with long lenses, who, in the pursuit of rare birds, brave the perils of First World highways in their 4x4 Outlandish Subarus. Subsisting on minimal rations of hastily consumed MacDonald's washed down with Coke, they hit the road at 2am, are in situ by dawn. Mission accomplished well before the sun's above the yardarm, they return to base and clock in at work by 8.30am, another life, year, country, county, patch, month, week, ebird tick under their belts.

It was a completely spurious accusation of course. True I braved SH1 on the tortuous route across the Kilmog from Waitati to that birding hotspot Hawksbury Lagoon and I did so after a paltry breakfast of porridge, coffee and toast. But it was just pure coincidence that a rare bird had been photographed on the lagoon the day before I was scheduled to resume the quarterly counts of the Lagoon; one of my many ornithological New Year's resolutions. I'd also like to point out that my transport is a 20 year old small cheap 2x2 early Korean model car and my long lens is a so called bridge camera, which claims to have a 50x zoom but takes so long to focus, if indeed it ever does, that any ornithological subject, be it rare or no, has long flown the frame.

Add to that the fact that I dutifully counted all the wildfowl on the Lagoon and assiduously noted down the passerines both alien and native and well I rest my case. Just for the record there were 36 Royal Spoonbill; 303 Black Swan; 83 Canada Geese; 690 Mallard/Grey Duck (note I am not claiming Mallard as a tick); 101 Shoveler; 675 Grey Teal and 167 Pied Stilt. Not to mention 28 House Sparrows, 12 Goldfinches and a single Tui and Fantail. Not the sort of application a mere Twitcher would exhibit.

You can look up the full list on eBird. Not a "rare" in sight.

The bloody thing had upped and flown to Karitane. It must have heard I was coming. If only on my way back, I'd turned left off the hazardous SH1 onto the pleasant rural road to Karitane, I'd have been able to tick it off for the year and leapt up several places on the top 100 NZ birders on eBird. I'd have been able to hold off the challenge of Bruce that other notorious Otago Twitcher, and had a hope of maintaining my rightful position well

up in the top 100 NZ birders. Instead I'm likely to slip out of the top 100 for the second consecutive year.

Sorry what was that? The rare bird? Well yes um well. Nothing to write home about actually. Couldn't give a stuff to be honest.



Mute Swan; Hawksbury Lagoon; 9 January. photo Sam ?

.....Derek Onley

Notices and Business

NZ Bird Conference and AGM, Te Anau, Queen's Birthday Weekend, 3 – 5 June 2017.

The 2017 New Zealand Bird Conference and Annual General Meeting of Birds New Zealand will be held in Te Anau, Southland during Queens Birthday Weekend. It is great to have this conference right on our doorstep again so hopefully a goodly number of Otago folk can make it. This should be a fantastic weekend of birds and birding.

The conference again aims to continue the fine work of previous conferences in making this the premier New Zealand event for the communication of new research findings on New Zealand birds, with two days largely being devoted to scientific presentations, while also providing

opportunity for discussion and networking and between bird researchers and birders in New Zealand.

A variety of workshops are planned for the Sunday morning, which include banding, wader identification, use of eBird, and reporting unusual birds.

The Field Trips on the Monday look very exciting with a choice of a visit to Lake Orbell and Takahe Valley, exploring the Milford Road, tramping the Kelper to Iris Burn(and back) and to Awarua Bay. Register early to hopefully get your first choice. Early Bird Registrations close 31 March. Register online at <http://www.osnz.org.nz/node/841> or ask Mary Thompson for a print version if you don't have computer access.

Student Support for NZ Bird Conference, 2017

The Otago Branch of Birds NZ is awarding grants-in-aid of up to \$200 for Otago student members to attend and present a research paper at this year's NZ Bird Conference, in Te Anau over Queen's Birthday Weekend, 3 - 5 June, 2017.

We are keen to encourage as many local students as possible to attend this conference since it is on our doorstep and we want to showcase what we do in Otago. It is a great opportunity to get your work noticed and presented to an audience focussing solely on ornithological research. In addition, it will give you the opportunity to meet ornithological researchers from a variety of organizations including DOC and other government agencies, universities, as well as those involved in private and community restoration projects throughout NZ.

Application details can be obtained from regional representative, Mary Thompson, maryt@actrix.co.nz. Applications close 1 March 2017.

Birds New Zealand (OSNZ) Subscriptions 2017 – reminder!

The annual membership subscriptions were due 1 January 2017. It is all too easy to overlook this during the Christmas New Year period, and there are quite a few of us who have forgotten to pay. Remember that you can pay subs online. Or ask your RR for a printed form. Thanks.

Mary Thompson Regional Representative

Programme 2017

Monthly Indoor Meetings will be held at 7.30pm in the Benham Seminar Room, Benham Building, Department of Zoology, 340 Great King Street.

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|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sat January 28th | Sinclair Wetland Summer Survey. Carpool leaving Dunedin at 8.30am. Backup Sunday January 29th To join the team, organize transport, and for more information contact Mary Thompson 464 0787, maryt@actrix.co.nz |
| Wed Feb 22nd | Indoor Meeting. Aalbert Rebergen. Life on braided rivers. All is not well; an upper Waitaki perspective. |
| Sat Feb 25th | Field Trip to Okia Reserve, Otago Peninsula, to follow two of the 1km transects to count birds for Peninsula Biodiversity Group and to look for fernbirds. Bring lunch, etc. Meet at the end of Dick Road at the start of the Pyramids/Okia walkway for a 9 am start. Carpool leaves from Anderson's Bay Inlet carpark in Shore Street at 8.30 am. For more details contact Lala Frazer lala.frazer@gmail.com |
| Wed March 22nd | Indoor Meeting. Kalinka Rexer-Huber. Latest seabird research. |
| Sat April 8th | Sinclair Wetlands Autumn Survey. Carpool leaving Dunedin 9.00am. Backup Sunday April 9th. To join the survey teams and for information contact Mary Thompson 464 0787, maryt@actrix.co.nz |
| Sun April 23rd | Tomahawk lagoon guided birdwatching. 10am -12 This is our contribution to the Wild Dunedin Festival. Meet by the large Tomahawk Lagoon just after the bridge on Tomahawk Road. We aim to have telescopes to let the public see birds close-up and to help identify them, etc. Contact Andrew if you can help; phone 454 5830 |

- Wed April 26th** Indoor Meeting. Sophie Fern. What does the public know about some of our native birds?
- Wed May 24th** Indoor Meeting. Thomas Mattern. Ecology and breeding biology of Tawaki, Fiordland Crested Penguin.
- Jun 2nd to Jun 5th** NZ Bird Conference and AGM. Te Anau.
- Wed June 28th** Indoor Meeting. Bruce McKinlay. How to discover new things about our birds using eBird data.
- Sun July 2nd** Winter Wader Count. High tide Dunedin 10.54 hrs. Height 1.9m. Counters needed at Aramoana, Hoopers & Papanui Inlets. New counters welcome. Contact: peter.schweigman@xtra.co.nz
- Sat July 15** Sinclair Wetlands Winter Survey. Carpool leaving Dunedin at 9.00 am. Backup Sunday July 16. To join the survey teams and for information contact Mary Thompson 464 0787, maryt@actrix.co.nz
- Wed July 26** Indoor Meeting. Helen Taylor. "Bird sperm quality in the wild: what, how, and why?"

Please give Mary suggestions for speakers or topics Indoor Meetings later in the year.

Newsletter editor: Derek Onley, derekonley@yahoo.com
Many thanks to all who contributed.

Contributions for next newsletter please by 16th February.