



Birds New Zealand
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Birds New Zealand

Otago Region Newsletter 4/2017 April 2017



Sinclair Wetlands Autumn Survey 2017

We are now into our second year of surveys of the Sinclair Wetlands. Each survey turns up some new and interesting observations. We had a good team of 8 to help this time with two new people as well. We feel like we are showing off the birds of 'our patch'. Upon arriving, two huge flocks of starlings circled over the carpark area, accompanied by NZ Falcon – our first sighting of a falcon at the wetlands – so that was a great start to the morning. We divided into teams to cover the area.

Species	Total counted	
	Autumn 2017	Summer 2017
Harrier	3	
Kereru		1
Magpie	2	7
Eastern Rosella		
Rifleman		1
Tui	3	
Bellbird	24	12
Grey Warbler	13	5
Brown Creeper	8	12
Fantail	16	
Tomtit	1	
Skylark		
Welcome Swallow		3
Fernbird	5	12
Silvereye	102	66
Blackbird	15	9
Song Thrush	3	1
Starling	26	0
Dunnock	4	3
Pipit		0
Yellowhammer		3
Chaffinch	12	3
Greenfinch		2
Redpoll	17	69
Goldfinch	5	2
House Sparrow		3

Ram Island: Results from 6, 5 minute count sites; each site counted twice

Species	Autumn 2017	Autumn 2016
Greylag Goose	3	
Canada Goose	55	83
Black Swan	4	38
Paradise Duck		4
Mallard(hybrid)	55	43
Shoveler	32	157
Grey Teal	4	8
Scaup	124	386

Ponds: Total counts of wildfowl.

Fernbirds showed up in numbers similar to last year in autumn (12 this year, 14 in 2016); the comment this year was that birds not very responsive to the playback of calls, although after the official count on the walk back to the car we were able to entice a couple of birds very close for excellent views (last year the comment was that 'birds very responsive to calls' and the weather conditions were similar then too).

We were able to count all 6 sites twice on Ram Island for the bush birds. Compared with summer, silvereyes were obviously flocking and fantails were often encountered (none seen in summer). There were also a small flock of brown creeper, feeding on the mulenbeckia berries along with the silvereye. A new species was picked up in the 5 minute bird count by sound only so needs confirmation-tomtit. This would be an excellent addition to the list. Starlings were present all over the wetlands; they seemed to be eating the young spiders from the nursery webs.

The total number of waterfowl on the ponds was lower this year than last; scaup was still the predominant species, followed by Canada goose, mallard and Shoveler. Little Shag and Black Shag were also seen using the ponds.

The calm, warm day made for a great outing as well, and our visitors saw several species they had never seen before. The species list for the day was 33, and the total now for the Sinclair Wetlands stands at 44 (this include the crakes which have been reported but not seen by us).

Scaup and White Heron at Tomahawk

Two families of Scaup, a White Heron, and a strange Spoonbill arrived at Tomahawk Lagoons in April 2017.

Scaup, Papango, or Black Teal, are small uncommon endemic diving ducks. They prefer large deep lakes, and are rarely at Tomahawk or coastal areas. On Sunday 9 April 2017, the day after we saw Scaup at Sinclair Wetlands, there were four Scaup on upper Tomahawk Lagoon. There were two males and two females, one couple larger than the other, frequently diving. A male lunged at the other male, but all four Scaup stayed close together. There was a strong NNE wind making waves, water deeper after rain. Water was clear, the algal bloom gone. This is only the second time I have seen Scaup at Tomahawk. Last time, 2 April 2012, there was a male Scaup and an Australian Coot close together, during heavy rain and flooding. This 9 April evening, Mary Thompson came to see Starlings flocking, saw four Scaup more distant and e-Birded them. Over following days they became more interesting.

I spent Monday 10 April 2017 following Scaup around, often 8 m to 10 m away behind flax and raupo, until it was too dark to see. Weather was calm. At sunrise, there were two Scaup males and a female diving, and another female floating asleep. Males called quick little whistles, females a soft reedy “quack.” At 11.49 am, the largest male Scaup pecked a Mallard Duck, a hard jab into her mid body, and she swam away. The larger Scaup pair stayed close together, while the other two swam further away, far apart. The small female Scaup didn’t like a female Mallard getting close. She called a shrill reedy “Queeek,” and flew low to the male Scaup, her wings pattering on the water. He whistled loudly, swam fast to her, and they stayed together.

By lunchtime, there were a total of eight Scaup. While a female floated sleeping, the other seven were swimming, diving, and calling. All eight were seen at once on the surface. They are two family groups. A big adult male with glossy black plumage and yellow eyes, very alert, is with the larger brown female, and two smaller brown juveniles. The other family are a smaller, duller black male with matt yellow eyes, with a smaller brown female, and two more small brown juveniles.

A mob of 14 + Mallard Ducks joined the Scaups close to shore, about 8 m from me. The male Scaup jabbed at Mallards. Three young female Mallards followed the more distant Scaup couple out to deeper water, where they dived in the same places as the Scaup. Only these three Mallards copied the Scaup, the others stayed near the bank. There was no aggression from the distant smaller Scaup couple, who kept diving, with three Mallards following and copying. The Scaup stayed under longer and for more distance than the Mallards. The Mallards’ submerged swims were only about 0.5 metre long. Total numbers of Scaup varied from eight, down to six and then four.

By late afternoon, two Scaup couples, males and females were energetically diving over a submerged upwelling spring, which I have felt pushing up under my kayak. Again, one couple were larger birds. No juveniles now. The large male, jet glossy black with yellow eyes, whistled “Wirri ---weeoo!” He watched me through the flax, and they all kept looking sideways up at the sky. There were no interactions with nearby Mallards, Shoveler Ducks, Black Swans, and a lone Grey Teal. No copying behaviours from Mallards. Then the Scaup vanished, probably

under overhanging trees. After 4.30 pm, there were four Scaup sleeping further out, frequently opening their eyes, surrounded by alert Paradise Shelducks. They did this for afternoon naps frequently over following days. These four Scaup were the largest male and female, with two juveniles, close together. Then there was preening, swimming, napping by three Scaup, with the male awake and looking at the bank and the sky. At 4.47 pm, two more Scaup, a small male and female, swam out of overhanging trees and joined the others. Now six Scaup were all diving. A Kingfisher called from Lagoon Creek. The smaller Scaup couple disappeared, leaving the larger adult couple and two juveniles. By 5.34 pm, they changed again, now the juveniles were gone and there were two adult couples. The larger male lunged at the smaller male, forcing that pair away. Two pairs continued diving, 2 to 4 m apart. Mobs of 20 to 100 Starlings flew through, assembling in fields and tree tops with smaller groups of Goldfinches. By 6.10 pm, noisy calling came from the Starlings' roost on the farm hill. It was getting too dark to see, so I went home.

Next morning, Tuesday 11 April, Mallard Ducks copied Scaup diving again. The larger male Scaup and larger female with two juveniles were diving near the short NW rock cliff, the deepest water in upper lagoon. A Mallard male and female followed them, making short inept dives. Twenty other Mallards stayed close to shore, not interested in Scaup. A Kingfisher called loudly from farm pines. Sixty-eight Paradise Shelduck gathered on the water. By now, all four Scaup swam closer to NE shore, diving fast. From 1 am Wednesday 12 April, constant heavy rain brought changes, and new birds.

In constant drizzle and heavy rain squalls of 12 April, there were four Scaup near SW raupo, plus the larger male's group of four in the NE top of upper lagoon among Paradise Shelducks. I could see the four distant birds through binoculars, and the four closer Scaup 10m away. Eight Scaup, again. A nervous White Heron stood in upper Lagoon Creek, then flew south, reappearing at lower lagoon many times since. Over following days there was more watching of Scaup in mist and rain. The larger male Scaup and family of four were observed, always on upper lagoon. On 13 April morning, the male swam away from the other three, and swimming 8 m offshore followed me all the way from near Lagoon Creek until I was out in the open again at the track end. Then he swam back to the others. I

sloshed on to lower lagoon outlet, where there was a sodden strange Spoonbill, who is still around. This Spoonbill is smaller than usual, too thin, dull scruffy off-white plumage, with a grey – black smudge laterally on the chest. The smudge is a collision mark, maybe it hit power wires or some solid object. It has a greyish black face, smooth bill and legs are greyish black, not the same black as more usual. On 19 April, it was more active, and the black smudge is gone. This Spoonbill is always alone, sleeping or standing ashore, not seen in the water or feeding yet. Probably a juvenile, it flies as if very tired. Lower lagoon's dead tree still has Little Shags, Black Shags, and Pied Shags at the same time.

On Good Friday 14 April, as constant heavy rain continued, the radio said Cyclone Cook was coming South and weather may get worse, so I went out again. I saw the big male Scaup for the last time, he flew in alone from South, fast and low almost touching upper lagoon water. He disappeared near the NE shore. There were new secret pools under dense flax and shore trees. Eight Grey Teal huddled in a floating group under ngaios. The White Heron and strange Spoonbill were at lower lagoon.

Since 15 April, there are two female Scaup, each often alone. The larger female is brown all over, with a white face line at the top of her bill, no other white on her. The other brown female is smaller, no white face line, but with a little white fleck on her left shoulder. So far, they are not together. On 17 April morning, the larger female Scaup was with 10 Mallard Ducks, following them around. She went away from the other ducks, to the middle of the lagoon with two Mallard females. The Scaup dived several times, away from the two Mallards, but she returned close to them. No copying dives from Mallards today. By noon she was alone in the NE shallows. Then on 19 April a small male Scaup with black plumage and yellow eyes was with a small brown female, diving on upper lagoon.

16 April gave good scope observations of the White Heron stalking lower Tomahawk Lagoon. This heron's yellow bill has a black line on the upper point, some subtle filmy plumes on the body, black legs. It stalked by wading close to long grass and shore vegetation, eating a succession of 40mm to 80mm Gobiomorphus cockabullies, each caught within two minute intervals. Then it caught a large fat Gallaxis type fish, with a dark lateral line, that looked as long as the heron's bill. It held the struggling

fish sideways in its bill, and it looked like the fish may escape. A pause, heron bent forward holding on, then a quick head flick and swallow. The heron's gape bulged, and the fish struggling made flexed wriggles down the throat and neck. Just before each kill, the heron froze with head up, neck waving in sideways shivers as if swaying in a breeze. Then, the fatal strike down, catching a fish every time.

By the time you read this, we will know which birds stayed for lagoon birdwatching over ANZAC weekend for the Wild Dunedin Festival.

Andrew Austin

Ornithological snippets

On 20th March, Les Feahey spent the day on a boat over the Taiaroa Canyon, recording among other things 30 **Buller's** and 120 **Shy Mollymawks**, 40 **White-chinned** and 10 **Westland Petrels**, 180 **Hutton's Shearwaters** and 2 **Black-bellied Storm-Petrels**. During a seawatch from Cape Saunders on 16th April by Derek Onley, notable sightings were 24 **Buller's** and 30 **Shy Mollymawks**, and 9 **Giant Petrels**, 8 of which were picked out as **Northern**.

Sam Scheibel identified 2 **Pied Shag** at Tomahawk Lagoon on 23rd March; 2 **Pied/Black Stilt** hybrids were also present. 4 immature **Black Stilts** were at the Lake Ohau delta on April 18th (Kenny Rose). On 4th April on the reservoir at Katiki Beach North, Tom Waterhouse found a **White Heron**. Pen Gillette came across 48 **White-faced Herons** just out of Owaka on 3rd April.

Several **NZ Falcons** were reported during the period, including 2 birds at Mou Waho (Lake Wanaka) on 30th March, and singles in April at Kennels Lane, Hawea (7th), Northern Cemetery in Dunedin (13th), Wanaka (14th & 16th), Waitati (14th & 15th) and on the Routeburn Track (16th).

Suzanne Schofield noted 6 **Black-fronted Terns** on the river by Balclutha aerodrome on 8th April, while Graeme Loh counted 1000 **White-fronted Terns** at Aramoana Mole a day earlier.

Mary Thompson recorded 12 **Fernbirds** at Sinclair Wetlands on 8th April. On 15th April at the Lake Sylvan campground, Sam Scheibel saw and

heard 6 **Yellowhead** and 8 **Rifleman**, as well as a **Morepork** there the following morning; later, on the Routeburn Track, he accumulated 22 **Rifleman**, 11 **NZ Robins** and 4 **Yellow-crowned Parakeets**, with 3 **Kea** back at the campground.



Finally, Charlie Fulton photographed a leucistic **House Sparrow** in his garden at Waverley in mid March.

Please send any noteworthy sightings to

richard@pcconnect.co.nz

Compiled by **Richard Schofield**

Notices and Business

Monitoring the birds of the Town Belt.

We have been thinking about the best way to tackle monitoring of the Town Belt for some time now. This is an important DCC reserve and also a top priority for the Dunedin Amenities Society. DAS aim is to promote Dunedin landscape and biodiversity and one of their main projects is restoration of the Town Belt habitat. DCC is also involved in control of weeds and pests of this DCC reserve. Aalbert Rebergen, the newly appointed Biodiversity Officer for the DCC, spoke to us at a recent meeting about the possibility of bird counts by Birds NZ as a useful tool for monitoring success of management of the DCC reserves.

A group of us got together to discuss the options. We looked at reports of bird monitoring programmes in reserves and other parks in a number of cities including Wellington and Christchurch. We concluded that for the Town Belt we should establish a network of 5-minute bird count sites along the Town Belt at approximately 250 m intervals. For the data to be available for comparisons in future years the count methods needs to be standardized as much as possible. We aim to carry out 5MBC in the same

month (November) with replicate counts at these sites by Birds NZ members. So look out for our first monitoring days in November.

Citizen Science

In addition, these count sites could be used throughout the year by members of the public, school groups, other community groups to provide

additional presence/absence data on the birds that are using the Town Belt. This approach would have the added advantage of promoting the Town Belt as an important recreational asset as well as an important habitat for native birds. The possibility of entering sightings online is being explored. The Count Sites could be marked by Information posts with details of birds and the method of counting and recording. We have support for this idea from DOC, DCC and DAS.

This is not the only reserve and the project could be extended to Mt Cargill, Mt Watkins, Flagstaff, Ross Creek.

Mary Thompson

EBird news

This year's Global Big Day is on 13th May. Here's a chance to be a part of birding's biggest day - three weeks from now. All you have to do is go birding for at least a few minutes, and submit your sightings to eBird. If you need an excuse to go enjoy birds on a lovely(?) weekend day in May, we've got you covered.

Last year's Global Big Day featured more than 60% of the world's bird species in a single day. Sightings came in from more than 17,000 eBirders spread across 154 countries. To be a part of Global Big Day, just go eBirding and enter your lists for 13 May. 128 species were recorded in New Zealand, but there was a distinct northern bias – I'm sure Otago could add some species not noted elsewhere.

Richard Schofield

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.

Wed April 26 Indoor Meeting. Sophie Fern. What does the public know about some of our native birds?

Sat May 13 Global Big Day for eBird. Go birding on this day and enter your checklist on eBird; this will add species to a world-wide count on that day, hopefully adding some of our unique native species.

Wed May 24 Indoor Meeting. Thomas Mattern. 'The Tawaki Project - Unraveling the secret (marine) life of the Fiordland penguin'.

Jun 2 to Jun NZ Bird Conference and AGM. Te Anau.

Wed June 28 Indoor Meeting. Bruce McKinlay. How to discover new things about our birds using eBird data.

June 24 - July 2 Garden Bird Survey. Count maximum number of birds seen in backyard during a 1 hour period.

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?"

- Wed August 23** Indoor Meeting. Claudia Mischler on ' Latest research on Black-billed Gulls.'
- Wed Sept 27** Indoor Meeting. Fergus Sutherland on 'Te Rere, thirty-six years helping penguins and other birds on the remote Catlins Coast.'
- Sat October 7** Sinclair Wetland Spring Survey. Carpool leaving Dunedin at 8.30 am. Backup Sunday October 8th. To join the survey teams and for information contact Mary Thompson 464 0787, maryt@actrix.co.nz
- Wed October 25** Indoor Meeting. Francesca Cunninghame on 'The future for Darwin's rarest finch - lessons learnt from 10 years conservation management of the Critically Endangered mangrove finch.'
- Wed Nov 22** Indoor Meeting. Mel Young on 'Foraging Ecology of Yellow-eyed Penguins'.
- Sun Nov 26** Summer Wader Count. High tide Dunedin at 10.10am, 1.8m. Counters needed at Aramoana, Hoopers, Papanui. New counters very welcome to join the teams.
Contact: peter.schweigman@xtra.co.nz

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

Contributions for next newsletter please by 18th May.

Can contributors please send any photographs separately from text as it makes compiling and formatting the newsletter much simpler and retains picture quality better. Thanks.