

Birds New Zealand
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Birds New Zealand

Otago Region Newsletter 5/2017 May 2017



Wild Dunedin Festival Tomahawk Lagoon Bird Watching

This event was successful again this year as weather was stunning. We were at the lagoon on Saturday and Sunday from 10 to noon. Andrew, Bruce and Mary helped visitors see birds close-up through our line-up of spotting scopes. A White heron and Royal spoonbill turned up to wow the crowds. Sunday was even busier with about 40 people coming by, including families, and Mary and Andrew (Bruce was at Woodhaugh

Gardens pitching his tent for our stall at the UrbanNature Expo) were non-stop focussing on white-faced herons, bills of shovelers, explaining differences between male and female shovelers and Paradise ducks. Everyone was very enthusiastic about seeing birds close-up through our spotting scopes – ‘oh, look at their red eyes’, ‘those ducks aren’t mallards’, ‘look how pink the legs of stilts are’, ‘I’ve never seen the yellow on the face of plovers before’ were some of the comments. Parents were as excited as their children.

A hybrid pied stilt spent the morning actively feeding along with two juvenile pied stilts, while the rest of the flock stood on one leg, with bill under wing. The variable oystercatchers put on a nice show, bathing vigorously before they too, settled to rest. The distant fallen logs hosted Little, Black and a Pied shag. The most picturesque of all were the Welcome swallows that regularly posed for photographs. The visitors all had their cameras out and were very pleased with the whole experience.



Mary Thompson.

BirdsNZ at the Wild Dunedin Festival



BirdsNZ had a well organised and professional looking tent and tables full of handouts at the Wild Dunedin Urban mini expo. Natalie Forsdick and Denise Martini got some really imaginative prizes and handouts for all ages.



We set the tent and stalls up well before kick off time and were able to relax a bit in the warm sun. By about 11:30 people were trickling through ours and the other stalls that were present there. We'd heard comments that some 750 people had registered for the walk through the town belt

and all of a sudden the piles of handouts that we had started to look rather small. By midday the space around the paddling pool was full. The paddling pool was pretty full of people and dogs as well. We were handing out information answering questions and listening to bird stories without stop.

Within about 40 minutes I had three recent locations of morepork in the city (Beverley Begg Observatory, MacAndrew Bay and Cannington Road) and I heard more about tui, bellbird and kereru at backyard feeders than I needed for a while.



Natalie and Denise were helping people with the quiz and collecting entries for the prize draw. Lots of children were fronting up and confidently filling out forms with little hesitation. Some of the adults needed a bit more help. Really popular were the Garden Bird guide poster and cut out bird mobiles (which much to the surprise of the DOC staff were found by Natalie on the DOC website!). Mary's bird nest collection was popular as well. I'm not sure how well people did on the quiz.



We barely had time for a sausage and sauce in bread as the questions and conversations carried on. Helen, Andrew and Mary had arrived and were sharing the load of talking to people. By 1:30 all the people had finished the walk and crowds were thinning out a bit. The Amenities Society had a prize giving draw for the walkers and then as we were out of poster, bird cutouts and other pamphlets it was time to pack up.

We had a really great time and met many enthusiastic bird lovers. Some I'm sure will follow up us and come along to Regional activities.

Thanks to Natalie and Denise for lots of organising

Bruce McKinlay

Another Otago Pelagic



The world without permanent topography - made of waves, wind and occasional rafts of current driven flotsam - lies just off our shores. This is the domain of the albatross and shearwaters, giant petrels and dolphins. Where the fittest survive to see the length of the day and those who are unable make their exit.

Most of us are too inexperienced to read the markers of what happens beneath the water's surface like the birds can. We can't read the invisible currents that bring up the bait fish. We might see the change in colour from grey-blue to blue-green to green-blue, the line of chop bisected by a surface flow, but we don't have the ingrained sense of place built from the fundamental necessity to read this liquid map. We can see the birds and the waves from wave height, but not the complete picture. Willing to try anyway, a dozen keen birders armed to the teeth with cameras and binoculars, set out on The Monarch Wildlife's Vivienne J early on April 22nd.

My notes and elusive memory tell me that the weather was fine, in fact, a lot better than we could have hoped for. Leaving the dock from Careys Bay shortly after sunrise we had a crisp but warming morning with a scattering of cloud that promised to be dry. A light, steady breeze gave hope to seeing royals on the wing without being too badly stirred by the ocean swells.

We warmed up camera shutters on groups of Little Blue's, moving purposefully and single Black-fronted Terns claiming their fish. Otago and Spotted Shag were seen below the albatross colony along with the more adept mammals on the rocks.



And then we were out to sea, to eventual depths of 900m, pursuing near-shore rafts of birds. Potential Black-billed Gull nesting sites were of early interest before turning further East. Sooty Shearwater waited, scattered among them were Buller's and Hutton's Shearwater. White-fronted Tern, dropped in from above while larger fish drove bait fish up from below.



Further out the numbers dropped from the thousands to more manageable counts. White-capped, Northern and Southern Royals, Buller's Mollymawk and Giant Petrels cruised the swell.



From the prone position over a submerging duckboard, lenses captured Cape Pigeons approaching for the well-oiled rice cereal burley with raucous abandon. White-chinned Petrel monitored the situation, but never with the same approval.

Short periods of travel afforded the chance to eat a hastily made cheese

sandwich, the addressing of wardrobe needs and reapplying sunscreen. It was during one of these breaks when the effects of seasickness had started to claim its first victims and I was in the forward cabin, that everyone suddenly became excited. The boat is only so long, but when I had emerged it was gone. For me, a life bird, a Black-bellied Storm Petrel, had come and gone without a second courtesy pass. Resigning myself to a possible dip, I restationed myself in the stern.

By the time the wallet went in the drink hours later, the routine of point-to-point pelagic birding had set in. The pretty steady action kept us engaged without the need for feigned optimism. The long lenses lined up on the rails, bino wielders to the stern and all passing in and out of the cabin. Our energetic leader and homemade burley enthusiast, looking over your shoulder to something only he could have taken note of. He and the skilful crew working hard to bring us to the birds, to read the sea and tell us its story.

One more new bird did pass by us within close range. Around midday, a Prion was called out with some degree of confidence, and then with less authority 'Antarctic, maybe?' Perhaps they captured it on camera and have since gotten its identification. I'd like to have gotten it too, but don't have enough "Prion" experience. At least I know that it is out there...

If you look for it, somewhere off the headlands of Otago, in about 15 metres of water is a wallet surrounded by an unfathomable treasure.

The Storm Petrel did eventually reappear, coming in past our port stern briefly, only to disappear behind the waves again. Leaving us to head for home via the headlands in the early afternoon, slightly burned, very tired and generally content.



A special thank you to the crew of the Vivienne J from Monarch Wildlife Ltd., onboard expert Graeme Loh and to the fellow birders who proved excellent company on a fine trip.

Sam Scheibel

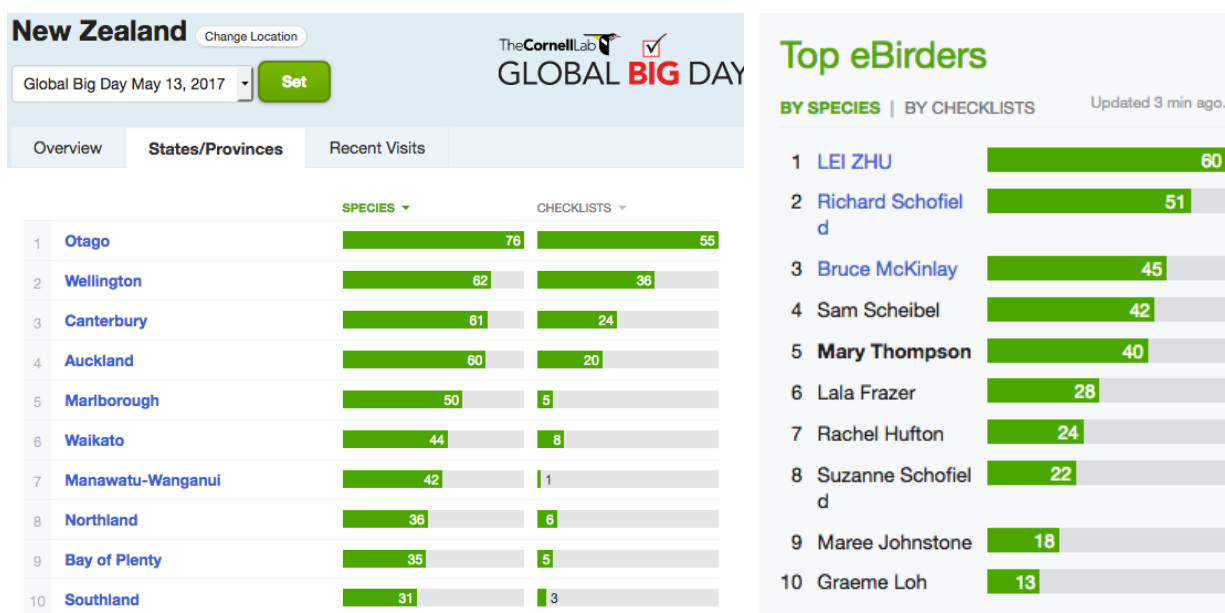
Otago Tops the Species List for NZ on Global Big Day.



Many members of the Otago Branch of Birds NZ enthusiastically set out on Saturday 13th May to see how many species they could spot in one day. The weather added to the enjoyment. The Otago total was 76 species, the top region for NZ. The whole of NZ got 109 species.

Go to this link and explore further

http://ebird.org/ebird/subnational1/NZ-OTA?yr=BIGDAY_2017a&m=&rank=hc



Lei Zhu was top for number of species seen in Otago and second for the whole of NZ; just missed out to a team from Wairarapa by 2 species. Well-done Lei. Lei explored all the birding hot-spots on the Peninsula, then headed to Moeraki- got some good seabirds, 2 white herons at Tomahawk, yellow-eyed penguin and NZ falcon contributing to 60 total. Graeme Loh

headed out 5km into the ocean by kayak and got some good seabirds-fluttering shearwaters, Northern Giant petrel, Cape pigeon, etc. Richard Schofield came in with 51 species around the Catlins. Rachel Hufton set out early from Makaroa and got us a morepork, mohua, rifleman and kea. Sam Scheibel spotted a reef heron at Aramoana. Lala Frazer and Jill Hamel got 28 species from MacAndrew Bay to Taiaroa Heads, including bar-tailed godwit. Maree Johnstone added Caspian tern and gannets in the harbour. Bruce and Mary's total came from a joint effort out at Waitati.

Waitati Big Day Field Trip.



13 members of the Introduction to Bird Studies course and 9 Birds NZ members all met at the Blueskin Bay Nursery carpark at 9.30am on a gloriously sunny, calm and mild morning, and eagerly set off in 3 groups to tally species in the area. Bruce's group started with Doctors Point and saw little Blue penguins, two Pied shags, etc. Franny, George and Neil Robertson (visiting from Te Anau) lead their group around the Orokonui Estuary walkway and added shoveler, grey teal and a pipit, which the other teams missed. Mary and Andrew's group started with spotting scopes to check the estuary for waders. The detour along Orokonui Creek to the sanctuary fence gave us all good views of tomtit, brown creeper and robin and two takahe across the fence (we counted them!). The total number of species seen was 49. Paradise ducks and pukeko were present in high

numbers. Kingfishers were busy fishing for crabs and one was sitting in the rafters of a hay barn (?looking for mice). Fantails were numerous and one black morph was seen. Bellbirds and grey warblers were very conspicuous. There were very few Welcome swallows (do they move north in winter?). There were surprisingly few finches, despite habitat that usually suits them, although a few of all species were added to the list.

Mary Thompson.

Scaup and Shags at Tomahawk Lagoons

Five Scaup are on upper Tomahawk Lagoon, while varying numbers of three species of shags are on both lagoons.

In April, eight Scaup arrived at upper lagoon, until a family group of four disappeared sometime over Easter. Since then, observations were of four or less birds. Then on 13 May 2017, Bruce and Andrew returned from the Global Big Day at Waitati and checked upper Tomahawk Lagoon. There appeared to be four Scaup close to shore, constantly diving and surfacing. Surfaced birds shedding droplets off their glossy plumage quickly repeated dives, a continual moving view of numbers. Bruce noted there were five Scaup, provoking a debate over numbers. Most of the time we watched, surfacing Scaup varied quickly from one to four. Then, all five Scaup were on the surface.

Seeing five Scaup together adds to a behavioural puzzle seen over previous weeks. In April eight Scaup arrived in two groups. Each group had an

adult male and female, and two juveniles. They had individual plumage differences. In one group the adult birds were larger, with the male having blacker plumage and larger yellow eyes than the other male. Sometimes all eight swam close together but still in groups of four, other times the larger male Scaup chased away the others not in his group of four. Then in late Easter the larger adult pair and their two juveniles disappeared. The larger male had been seen flying alone in from south a few times. The remaining four Scaup seen daily were the smaller adult male and female and two juveniles. Mostly these four behaved like a family group staying

together swimming, napping, and diving. However sometimes Scaup chased one juvenile, but showed no aggression to closer juveniles. A chase included a swimming charge and lunging at the juvenile. The aggressor, usually an adult, but sometimes another juvenile, would swim rapidly past closer Scaup to target that particular juvenile. The threatened juvenile fled by swimming away fast, and was left drifting alone away from the other three. Eventually, it quietly swam back over to the edge of the group, until an adult or another juvenile chased it away again. The juvenile chased is always on the outer edge of the group. Juveniles close together or surrounded by others are not chased away. This happens in most observations since Easter.

So now it seemed there were four Scaup, with the rejecting behaviour noted toward one juvenile. What happened to the larger Scaup pair and their juveniles? Maybe after the disappearance of the larger adult pair and family one of their juveniles survived whatever happened and joined the other group, but is always an outsider. Speculations, but why always chase away one juvenile? It always returns to the edge of the group; probably because being near any group of Scaup is better than being alone. Now we know there are five Scaup, maybe one juvenile is a survivor from the lost group and unrelated to the other four? Something happened, one Scaup juvenile is kept on the outside, and we don't know the story.

Meanwhile, three species of shag are on both lagoons, but more often on lower lagoon. Species and numbers vary greatly at different times. On 8 May 2017 afternoon, on the famous fallen tree at lower lagoon there were seven Pied Shags (yes, re-counted repeatedly), one Little Shag, and one Black Shag. An eighth Pied Shag stood on a rock ashore. The White Heron waded in far away shallows. The juvenile Spoonbill now commutes daily between both lagoons. During another re-count of shags on the tree, a brown blur shot down through the scope and everyone got out of there in a commotion of flight, splash downs and calling. There were rapidly fleeing shags, two White-faced Herons; and many Paradise Shelducks, Shovelers and Mallards. The tree branches, trunk lying on the waterline, and shore instantly emptied of birds in all directions. Shags that fled from the tree were now bobbing low in the water, heads swivelling. Then, a young dark Harrier rose above the shore and over the pines.

At upper lagoon, four Scaup were napping together in a group and still swimming with their heads tucked in, opening and closing their eyes. An immature Kingfisher with a sooty fluffed chest flew along the shore, perching on low flax stalks to look down at cockabullies and little perch in the shallows. In late evening there were two Pied Shags fishing in upper lagoon.

On 10 May 2017 morning, shag species and numbers at lower lagoon were different again. On the fallen tree were three Pied Shags, one Black Shag, but no Little Shags. A fourth Pied Shag swam further out. Shoveler are the most common duck lately, with 80 or more near the outlet; at the same time as 57 Paradise Shelduck and 45 Mallards scattered over the lagoon. Shoveler are the most wary ducks, all flying off together in a sound of hurried whirring out to the middle of the lagoon at the first hint of a human.

Andrew Austin

Ornithological snippets

A pelagic off Taiaroa Head on 22nd April produced some interesting sightings; there were good numbers of **Buller's & Shy Mollymawks**, and **Northern & Southern Royal Albatross**, along with both forms of **Giant Petrel**. Among other highlights were **90 Cape & 75 White-chinned Petrels**, **3 Buller's & 25 Hutton's Shearwaters**, and **1 or 2 Black-bellied Storm Petrels**.

Ed Waite found a **Bittern** beside the Glenorchy/Paradise Road on 15th March, and another (or the same) was in the nearby Kinloch area on 2nd May. Up to 2 **White Herons** have been present at Tomahawk Lagoon throughout the last month, with a report of one in the Port Chalmers area on 27th April. Also at Tomahawk, a **hybrid black/pied stilt** has been seen several times, with Sam Schiebel finding 3 there on 9th May; Lei Zhu reported another at Hawkesbury Lagoon on 13th. Alan Baker saw a **Morepork** at Ross Creek on 29th April. It was in a tree beside the track at 5.20 p.m.

The bulk of this summary has been compiled from Ebird reports; however, any interesting observations (not just rare birds, but things in out of the way places, high numbers, interesting behaviour) would be welcome – please send them to richard@pcconnect.co.nz

Richard Schofield

Black-billed Gulls at Blueskin Bay



Nick Beckworth sent this picture of a large flock of gulls taken at Warrington, Blueskin Bay on 26th April, to Mary, asking for an identification. Unless there had been an unprecedented invasion of northern hemisphere gulls, they had to be either the usual NZ red-billed or black-billed species. The confusing bit however seemed to be the red legs. Cheap, NZ bird books invariably tell you that black-billed gulls have not only black bills but black legs.



So just to prove them wrong, here's a photo of a sandwich stealing black-billed gull in Invercargill's Queen's garden on the 21st of May. Not only is it sporting red legs but there is a dash of red in the bill as well. Standard stuff for black-bills at this time of year.

So how do you tell the difference?



Bill shape is pretty conclusive. Here's a blow up from Nick's photo showing slim, slightly down-curved bills



and for comparison red-billed gull.



Bill colour is about as reliable as leg colour. Just to make things awkward, young red-billed gulls don't have red bills.



Black-billed gulls also look very white, their backs are paler grey than red-billed and they tend to be less quarrelsome, standing closer together in flocks as Nick's photos show.



If, as there often are, a few red-bills standing nearby, then it's just possible to believe they have longer legs and differently shaped heads (left).



But as is also suggested by the above photo of immatures, don't rely on the other oft quoted differences in wingtip pattern (left). That only applies to adults.

Nick went on to say, "The gulls seem to gather in the bay or on the beach in April each year, (2014, 2015, 2016). Only once seen them leaving for the day they were flying out of bay past Doctors Pt heading along towards Hayward Pt. From what I have observed they may come and go for 6 - 8 days but as the tide changes I would not always be in the position to see them. When I see them in the bay early morning low tide they could not have been there all night unless they sit on the water during the night time high tide."

Flocks of gulls, most likely black-billed, were reported roosting on the water at Hawkesbury Lagoon around the same time in late April this year and large flocks have been regularly seen earlier on in the year, usually January to March at Karitane since at least the early 1990s. The numbers involved, often in the thousands, are a fair percentage of the total NZ population, suggesting that coastal Otago is an important habitat in the non-breeding season.

Derek Onley

Notices and Business

Monarch Wildlife Cruises Otago Canyons Trip

The fourth “Southern Ocean Mini-Expedition” that Monarch Wildlife Cruises has offered aboard its 12 metre vessel Vivienne J. will set out on Sunday May 28th.

As before, we plan on taking the Vivienne J out past Cape Saunders to the deeper waters and offshore canyons to look for seabirds and other wildlife that frequent these rich feeding grounds. You may have seen the news stories this week from Otago University’s Dr Will Rayment about the high numbers of cetaceans using the canyons – we didn’t see any on our previous trips but we always keep our eyes peeled (strange expression!) .

The trips are for photographers, birdwatchers and nature lovers. Each trip has seen 20 or more species of sea-birds, with some very interesting sightings and behaviour.

We will again have Graeme Loh as our on-board go-to guy for species ID.

We have limited numbers to 12 people on a first come, first served basis. Cost is \$160 per person.

The trip will depart from Careys Bay pontoon at 8:00am and return about 3pm. Please be at Careys Bay at 7.45am.

You will need to bring your lunch and water bottles - hot drinks and biccies will be complimentary. You will need warm clothing, sunglasses, sunblock and a hat - along with your camera gear, binocs and field guides. We also advise sea-sick remedies

For more information or to secure your place please call (03) 477 4276.

We have also offered Ingrid Hutzler another Otago Canyons Trip for Birds NZ members on June 7, after your Te Anau conference, as well as 20% discount on regular Monarch trips 6 to 8 June.

Neil <neil@wildlife.co.nz>

EBird news

Saturday 13th May was eBird's Global Big Day. A total of 76 species were recorded in Otago, from 55 checklists submitted. Most lists were from near the coast and around Dunedin, but extra species were added from Makarora, the Catlins and around Queenstown. Graeme Loh kayaked offshore for some pelagic birding with a difference. Worldwide 6564 species were logged on the day (a new record), including (by my reckoning) 8 that were reported only from Otago - Yellow-eyed Penguin, Buller's Mollymawk, Northern Royal Albatross, Stewart Island Shag, Kea, Yellow-crowned Parakeet, Yellowhead and Brown Creeper.

Regular eBird users will have noticed that there are now three options for Redpolls, namely Common, Lesser and Common/Lesser sp. There is currently a range of opinion over which species/subspecies is/are found in New Zealand, as well as debate as to whether the various forms of Redpoll elsewhere are actually one or more species. It is quite possible that in the near future all Redpolls will be lumped as a single species. However, for the time being I would recommend submitting records as Lesser Redpoll; unless you are seeing excessively large numbers, you will not be asked any awkward questions! If you think you have seen any other form, please submit it as such, along with any supporting evidence. **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.

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| 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. "Avoiding conservation by numbers: how genetics can help save threatened bird species" |
| Wed August 23 | Indoor Meeting. Claudia Mischler on "Experiences while researching seabirds". |
| 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 21st June.

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.