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**Birds New Zealand**

*Otago Region Newsletter 10/2018 October 2018*



## **Night Birders Seek Wetland Secrets**

Ten birders searched Sinclair Wetlands for two species of crake on Saturday night October 6 and early Sunday morning.

At the wetlands centre, we organised for the night. The centre is well set up for groups, with plenty of room, and all the utensils and furniture necessary. Sue is frequently there, so she settled us in. Women claimed the bunkroom, and men took mattresses into the lounge. Sharon and Ken from Alexandra stayed in their campervan. I camped in my green tent, ideal to listen for Bittern and owls.

We gathered for an evening picnic, then organised teams to search in the

night. A final burst of activity at the centre was people sorting warm clothes, packs, torches, maps, and call playback recordings for Marsh Crake. Ivan and I went the longest distance, hearing Fernbirds on our hike out to search for crake around Ram Island. Ivan was expedition technician with the playback device, and I had the map. The satellite map was like blurred splotches of camouflage paint, so I enhanced it with ballpoint outlines of features and made notes on it as we walked. It might be useful to mark where we find crake.

Weather was fine and calm, perfect for listening, with clear views as we walked to the silhouette bulk of Ram Island standing up in the dusk sky. Walking in dimming light and then darkness was easy on the tracks. We played Marsh Crake calls at likely looking sites, with silent intervals waiting for crake to reply. It was good watching the land change as night moved in. We scanned shallows, shore, low overhanging vegetation tunnels, and scrub and grass walled channels, hoping to see crake. Previous views of crake show they can be active but silent. Still no crake at station 2 above a pond, but we saw other birds. Two Grey Teal swept in low and vanished in the raupo. Three Greylag Geese led 2 goslings on a channel, 2 Mallards talked softly, 6 Scaup and 4 Shoveler drifted. Two Scaup in a secluded channel probably had a nest nearby. A Canada Goose flew over low, then a Black-backed Gull, followed by a Little Shag, and another Little Shag on the pond. A Welcome Swallow swooped over, as a Fernbird called continually. Our next station revealed 4 Grey Warblers, 2 Fernbirds, 2 Canada Geese flying over, 3 Dunnock, 4 Chaffinch, 2 Welcome Swallows, 5 loud Yellowhammers, about 8 Silvereyes, 4 Blackbirds, and a Fantail. No crake heard or seen. Are they in there silently?

We walked on in rapidly closing darkness. A Fantail flittered and wheeled through clouds of midges hovering above trees. Do midges notice that some of their companions are suddenly gone in seconds? Probably not, with brief lives of hatch, breed, die. But then, is ours' the only version of awareness? Vibrating wings from swarms of midges perched in tree foliage started hissing like static electricity as we walked by, and suddenly silenced the second we passed. A low flying Canada Goose's wings flashed alternately dull invisible and brighter underside as it came in calling loudly through last light ahead of long shadow fingers over wetland expanse. A distant big circle of raupo far north of Ram Island was rendered by twilight into an arena of bronzed blades where dozens of

Blackbirds were dark dots. More than 25 Welcome Swallows swooped all over the reeds. So far away they could just be seen through binoculars.

Below the old hut, we crossed a grassy bridge over a culvert on black water. We followed a slow black tea coloured creek, stepping on carex clumps to keep our feet dry, and looked back at times to landmark our route for later when it is darker. We frequently paused, listened and looked. Then we stopped on a marshy point just above the stream surface, and played the calls again. Dusk was cool, calm, silent and quickly getting darker. Views changed by the minute as dimming light and shadows shifted, and places filled with dark silhouettes. At the next creek corner, overhanging flax made secret places where the stream narrowed. Little fish rising made subtle circles. Ripples waved from under flax, where 2 Scaup swam out to look at us and whistled softly, and swam back under the flax.

The big pond seems more like a lake, and more so at night. We continued trying to lure crake. Shoveler drifted and more flew in and called quietly, as Scaup whistled and chuckled softly. We heard the distinctive flight sounds of more Shoveler arriving and splashing down abruptly, then talking to each other. Four Grey Teal swooped in away from us over a wall of raupo and landed in the next channel. The loudest sound was frogs

racketing on incessantly, zee – zee – zee... A big dark green beetle buzzed around us, possibly lured by blue light off the playback screen. It kept landing and traversing my cap on spiked legs, gripping my hand as I removed it several times. Best not carried back to base, where it would desperately head butt walls and lights, and die dried out under a couch. After landings, hat climbing, and disentangled releases the beetle departed as a buzz fading away over trees.

After eight playback stations on our walk around Ram Island, we didn't hear any crake. It was getting past due back time, so we started our return. We saw headlamp flickers from another team. Bruce was with them, just arrived from the airport. They were silently listening near where our Fernbird team heard Marsh Crake in July. We heard soft rustles and a splash at the track edge. They earlier saw a stoat after similar sounds, and we previously saw a stoat there several times during daylight bird surveys.

Now past the 9 pm return time, we all headed back. Then we saw a small round light floating and swerving behind us, which became Sue running to direct us to Mary's group. Everyone joined Mary on a grassy ledge over a hollow where she heard Marsh Crakes.



The loudest sound was constant frogs' calling. Then we heard lower sounds of two Marsh Crakes calling, quick harsh "kreck," and ticking like a clockwork toy winding down under blankets. The calls were the same as the playback recording, and heard by our Fernbird team in July. Koitareke is Maori for Marsh Crake, which may be imitative of calls. Crake originates from Middle English after Old Norse kraka, imitative of croak. Long before us, other cultures including Maori, ancient European peoples and Vikings heard crakes call. People ashore heard it, and from their waka, coracles, and longboats going inland. We went back to the house for supper.

My tent looked smaller in the dark. Roosting House Sparrows fluttered fitfully in the trees. Although recent night and dawn temperatures on the Taieri were 3 deg C, I was warm enough with my sleeping bag unzipped. I left the door tied open all night to hear better, see the stars, and I like the air. Nearby sheep and lambs made the loudest sound, waking me hourly

with conversations and multiple mother and child reunions. Bad for sleeping, but useful for birding every time I lay awake yet again. At 10.40 pm a Little Owl called five times, very close. At 11.00 pm a Bittern called four quiet booms from north. At 11.37 pm another Bittern called four booms far away from southeast. By 00.12 am Sunday, two Little Owls were calling, one nearby and another from distant macrocarpas, then flying Pied Oystercatchers piped. Woken again by sheep at 00.49 am, I heard a Bittern booming five times from north. At 3.49 am two Fernbirds started from southeast, “suu—tick” and “plick” calls. Blackbirds called, and a Skylark started at 5.00 am as I went outside to very heavy dew. Daytime birds were calling.

I waited until 5.40 am before approaching the silent dark house. We had agreed to a 6.00 am start for Sunday. As I crept into the kitchen to make tea, an invisible voice said good morning from the dining room. Sue emerged from a couch, showed me a pack of real coffee and a plunger pot, and went through to wake the others. We all assembled outside, in varying states of awareness. Bruce joined our long walkers team, carrying his camera. Ivan had the playback device, now with Spotless Crake calls, to try near channels with vegetation cover. I carried two stakes for automatic recorders. We paced fast over the wetland to meet sunrise on Ram Island, and played Spotless Crake calls without any replies. There were views of red dawn clouds over hills, and a low yellow crescent moon. Advancing sunrise revealed Maungatua’s ridges and angles, and bush line below the tops. Bruce photographed the revealing land and skyline with quiet concentration, as Ivan and I repeated waiting for Spotless Crake to not reply to us. We assembled two automatic recorders for Bittern. Low angled sunrise coloured the big pond a flat slate grey, with black Scaup. Fernbirds plinked. Ivan was delighted when a bright crimson male Redpoll joined two females foraging on the ground.

By 8.00 am we were with the others again, watching two Marsh Crake creep and dash through scrub and thin reeds in the same low pond as last spring. We heard their quick calling “brrrrr,” like muffled clockwork toys winding down. Everyone looked happy going to breakfast. Yesterday, October 6 was another eBird Big Day, so Richard keenly accepted our lists of birds, including Little Owl and Bittern within my tally of 35 species. Thanks to everyone for a good trip, especially Mary for organising it, and Sue for settling us in the house.

**Andrew Austin**

## Ornithological Snippets

A **Great Crested Grebe** was seen by Bruce McKinlay at Glenfalloch Wharf on 29th September. There have been two pelagic trips out to the Taiaroa Canyon in the last month. The first, on 30th September aboard Vivienne J, produced an **Antarctic Tern, Black-browed and Campbell Mollymawk, Westland and White-chinned Petrels, a Broad-billed Prion**, and good numbers of **Salvin's Albatross**, among others. The second trip, on 6th October with Fierce Elegance Charters, also reported an **Antarctic Tern**, along with both **Northern and Southern Giant Petrel**, good numbers of **Fairy Prion** and **Sooty Shearwater**, and three **White-chinned Petrel**.

On to land, and **Shining Cuckoos** have been thin on the ground this spring, The first was heard at the top of Blueskin Road by Valerie Fay on 23rd September, the next at Awakiki Bush on 29th September, then one at Dalmore Reserve on 7th October, heard by Maureen Howard, and one calling on the outskirts of Balclutha on 18th when the first was also heard in Waitati. Spring may have been around for a while, but there are still some sizeable finch parties around; most notable was a flock of 156 **Greenfinch** counted by Bruce McKinlay at Bayfield Park on 16th October.



There have been two sightings of **Cirl Bunting** at Katiki Point. Two Australian visitors reported a male & three females or immatures on 27th September, while three days later Scott Brooks returning home from the day's pelagic, found two pairs there.

photo Scott Brooks

Reports to [cluthaphotos@gmail.com](mailto:cluthaphotos@gmail.com).

compiled by **Richard Schofield**

## Another Big eBird Day, Saturday 6th October.

The total number of species for NZ was 133. The main aim of the Big Day is to get birders submitting eBird checklists and these increased from 306 for May Big Day to 473 for this October Big Day.

Lei Zhu again had the highest number of species for an individual birder at 64 species in one day. Two group efforts had 68 and 79. The Otago region at time of writing had recorded 79 species, which was only one species behind Wellington with 80. Our Otago count was boosted by marsh crake, bittern and Little Owl heard at the Sinclair Wetlands during our overnight fieldtrip. Rachel Hufton got some nice central Otago high country species: wrybill, black-fronted tern, black-billed gull, pipit, banded dotterel. The pelagic trip was well-timed so the tally of seabirds was excellent. Royal Spoonbills are already nesting on Taiaroa Heads. We missed out on White Heron this time, although one is still frequenting Tomahawk lagoon.

### Postscript from Lei Zhu



Buller's Mollymawk & Sooty Shearwater

Here are a few photographs I took during the Bigday event last week.... This pelagic cruise was organised by Fierce Elegance, guided by Hamish Spencer.



Hutton's ? amongst the Sooties.



Antarctic Tern?

The Antarctic Tern (above) and Short-tailed Shearwater (below) have not been confirmed in eBird (if they are counted we will have more species than Wellington!). We can discuss the identification of these two birds in our next monthly meeting.



Short-tailed Shearwater?

## **Notices and Business**

### **Counting Birds in the Town Belt October and November It's that time of year again.**

Last year we did 374 independent counts and encountered 5200 birds - lets see if we can beat this total this year. I hope a goodly number of us will take part and spend as many mornings as possible adding counts to our total. This is a great way to take a walk and at the same time help out Town Belt Survey.

Our project to undertake as many 5 minute bird counts in the Town Belt at our 10 count sites is scheduled for mornings of October and November when weather calm and no rain. You can do these as individuals or pairs or groups.

Obtain map of sites and new improved record sheet from Bruce at [president@osnz.org.nz](mailto:president@osnz.org.nz).

### **Training and Practice.**

We will also be meeting at Moana Pool Carpark to do some counts as groups, when the more experienced among us can help the less experienced learn the calls etc. This is a very good chance to practise our

bird id skills by sound as well as sight, so hope many of you will take the opportunity. And that the more experienced folk can come to some of these sessions to help the rest of us. Thanks. We are also advertising these sessions to the public.

For training sessions meet at the Moana Pool Carpark on Sunday morning at 9:30 am on 28 October, and 4, 11, 18 and 25th November. The 12 sites take about 2 h to cover but you can do as few or many as you like.

If you have any questions please contact Bruce at 0273891477.

### **Opportunity for Involvement with Falcon Study**

Graham Parker and his team started on the falcon project again in October and it will run through the summer months. Fieldwork focuses on finding falcon nests and capturing and banding adult and juvenile birds.

Generally involves full days, so if you are interested please be prepared to spend the whole day out in the (mostly) plantation forests. We'll leave each morning from Maryhill, Dunedin.

If you are interested to help contact Graham Parker at: [g.parker@parkerconservation.co.nz](mailto:g.parker@parkerconservation.co.nz)

### **Young Birders Camp, Marlborough, 15-20 April 2019**

We have received information about next year's camp. It will be held near Blenheim, staying at Watsons Way Lodge backpackers in Renwick. Campers need to be able to get themselves to the Marlborough province - they can be picked up from Picton ferry terminal, Blenheim airport or bus station. The field trips include Blumine Island (one day), Kaipupu Point, (both by boat but they don't travel if its rough), gull band reading, Wairau lagoon walk, walking to Cape Campbell Lighthouse (this is about 2.5 to 3 hours each way; one day) banding/mistnetting, and visiting other places of local interest. There will also be evening lectures.

Can members who know of young people who might be interested please let them know about this camp. These camps are always very popular so they need to act quickly. I can give them further details.

Any 13 – 18 year old who would like to be considered for acceptance to attend this camp needs to contact Kristin Ruwhiu at [kristin.ruwhiu@hotmail.com](mailto:kristin.ruwhiu@hotmail.com), with an expression of interest including why they think they should be accepted.

Kristin is also keen to hear from adults who might be keen to help with the camp.

**Mary Thompson**

## **EBird news**

### **Patch lists**

A slightly more light-hearted way to use eBird is the patch list. This gives you the opportunity to keep tabs on a site that you regularly visit, or combine a number of nearby locations on to a single list. Your patch should comprise a relatively small area or distance – eBird guidelines are up to 8 km, or about 10 km<sup>2</sup>. For example I have created a couple of patches, based on habitat; one consists of all sections of the Clutha River that I visit as separate locations, giving me an overview of the whole river, and the other is three (almost) continuous stretches of gravel road across farmland, totalling nearly 5 km.

As well as keeping your patch totals in one place, you can keep a (competitive?) on other users. To get involved, look for “Patch Totals” on the “Explore” tab (about halfway down the page on the right-hand side), and follow the instructions. More details on patch lists are at <https://help.ebird.org/customer/en/portal/articles/1006845-yard-and-patch-guidelines>

## **Pelagic Bird Trip**

Fierce Elegance Charters, is running another pelagic bird trip from Carey's Bay on 11 November. Tour departs Careys Bay 7am and returns 12pm  
Guide Hamish Spencer.

\$120 per person.

Email for bookings [fierce.elegance@xtra.co.nz](mailto:fierce.elegance@xtra.co.nz)

<https://www.facebook.com/fierceelegancecharters/>

**Andria Scott**

## **Do you provide sugar-water to birds? Do you live in Auckland or Dunedin?**

We are looking for local gardens in Auckland and Dunedin to be study sites for our Sugar-water Feeder Project!

Feeding birds in backyards is a popular pastime in New Zealand. More and more people are providing sugar water to attract native birds. However, very little is known about how this practice might affect our native birds – does it help them or harm them?

My name is Daria Erastova and I am a PhD student with the School of Biological Sciences studying the influence of sugar-water feeders on native birds in urban Auckland and Dunedin. I am recruiting residential backyard gardens in both cities with existing sugar-water feeders that frequently have birds visiting (e.g. tui, bellbirds and silvereyes). Mind that you can join even if you don't have a sugar-water feeder! I will be catching and banding birds, and observing the birds at feeders in your garden.

Please get in touch with me ([dera076@aucklanduni.ac.nz](mailto:dera076@aucklanduni.ac.nz)) if you live in Auckland or Dunedin, have established sugar-water feeders in your garden, and are interested in being part of this study. If you would like more information about this project, please visit: <https://sugarfeederproject.wixsite.com/sugarfeeder>

Ngā mihi,

**Daria A. Erastova**

PhD candidate, School of Biological Sciences  
Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau | University of Auckland  
Aotearoa | New Zealand

## Programme 2018

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

- Sun October 28**            Town Belt 5 Minute Bird Counts.  
Meet Moana Pool Carpark, 9.30am. Any questions contact Bruce 0273891477.
- Wed October 24.**        Indoor Meeting. Denise Martini on “Evolution and conservation of the endangered New Zealand Kaka.”
- Sun Nov 4, 11, 18,25**    Town Belt 5 Minute Bird Counts.  
Meet Moana Pool Carpark, 9.30am. Any questions contact Bruce 0273891477.
- Wed November 28.**     Indoor Meeting. Luke Easton on “Anti-predator behaviour of NZ Robins.”
- Sun December 2**        Summer Wader Count. High tide 12.42pm. Counters are needed at Aramoana, Hoopers, Papanui Inlets and Blueskin Bay. Please confirm participation with [peter.schweigman@xtra.co.nz](mailto:peter.schweigman@xtra.co.nz)

Newsletter editor: Derek Onley, [derekonley@yahoo.com](mailto:derekonley@yahoo.com)

Many thanks to all who contributed.

Contributions for the next newsletter by 21st November please.