

TARA

Newsletter of Auckland Region OSNZ

February 2011



Empty nests, absent adults and few chicks, (at left), are all signs of low breeding success for these Australasian Gannets at Muriwai's Takapu Wildlife Refuge, (north-west of Auckland). Petrels, penguins and shearwaters are also affected by the impacts of this seasons's La Nina weather system. (Photo: Suzi Phillips).

La Nina affects seabird nest success

There are some major oceanic changes going on this year which are affecting Australasian Gannets at Muriwai as well as other seabirds.

The overall driver of these impacts is the La Nina climate pattern which is having its biggest event since 1975.

Department of Conservation scientist, Dr Graeme Taylor, says he visited the Australasian Gannet colony at Muriwai in early January and counted the chicks. There were about 50 present at all three colonies, but most nest sites were deserted or had birds standing over empty nests. "It's a very poor season for this species. The Grey-faced Petrels at Bethells Beach also

had many more malnourished chicks than normal, and the numbers of breeding pairs of the Shearwaters was down on recent seasons", he said. "The overall pattern is one of birds struggling to find food and only the best breeding pairs are attempting to breed and succeeding this season."

Dr Taylor explained that the La Nina weather system brings cool water from the Humbolt current off South America up to the Equator and pushes this relatively colder water along the Equator, reversing the equatorial counter current, (that normally flows west to east)."

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Conference programme for June

Lower Hutt is the venue for the two day OSNZ conference and annual meeting at Queen's Birthday this year. The Conference will be held at the Dowse Art Museum Conference Venue, at 45 Laings Road, Lower Hutt on 4th and 5th June.

The conference Registration form is being circulated to Society members in the next issue of "Southern Bird" and it can also be downloaded from the Ornithological Society's website, www.osnz.org.nz

The Registration form invites expressions of interest for presentations of papers and posters. Dr Ralph Powlesland and Dr Graeme Taylor are arranging the scientific days and they welcome expressions of interest from members and others who wish to present a paper or poster. Email contacts for Ralph and Graeme are: Ralph Powlesland, powles1@attglobal.net and Graeme Taylor, at gtaylor@doc.govt.nz

The programme includes two scientific days with themes such as 'Long-term bird monitoring projects - techniques and population trends', and 'Translocations - techniques and outcomes', on day one. Day two themes are 'Tracking studies - long-distance movements and migrations', and 'Threatened species management - techniques and population outcomes'. These are followed by papers on various topics.

TARA - Newsletter of the Auckland Region of OSNZ

Auckland Branch OSNZ meetings are held on the first Tuesday of each month at 7.30pm, at Unitec on Carrington Road in Point Chevalier. Admission by donation. Visitors and friends always welcome.

Regional Representative:

Mel Galbraith, Ph 480-1958 (a/hours) or email melgar62@slingshot.co.nz
62 Holyoake Place, Birkenhead.

TARA Editor:

Suzi Phillips, Ph 021-271-2527 or email suzi@dialogue.co.nz

Regional Recorders :

Landbirds, Waterfowl & Rails:

Suzi Phillips, Ph 09-479-5395 or email suzi@dialogue.co.nz

Waders, Herons, Spoonbill & Egrets:

Adrian Riegen, Ph 814-9741 or Email riegen@xtra.co.nz
231 Forest Hill Rd, R.D.1, Henderson.

Seabirds, Gulls, Terns & Shags:

John Simmons, Ph 828-8642 or email johnsimmons@clear.net.nz
4 Bamford Place, Avondale.

Census and Surveys

All members are invited to take part in the OSNZ Auckland branch census and surveys that take place during the year. There are always experienced members on these trips and they welcome new members to get involved in identifying and recording the birds.

Auckland Branch to visit Maungatautari in March

The Auckland Branch of OSNZ plans a visit to the Maungatautari Ecological Island, (near Cambridge in the Waikato), next month. The trip arose from a discussion at one of the 2010 meetings. **The date for the trip is Saturday 19th March.** The trip is dependent on a minimum of 30 people to keep the transport cost at a reasonable level. **If you are interested in joining this trip please let Mel Galbraith know your intentions by email or phone ASAP.** The trip will leave Unitec (Mt Albert) at 8.30am, with an estimated time of return at 5pm. This will allow at least three hours to explore the project's Southern Enclosure where there are birds such as Kaka, Hihi, Tui, Takahe, Tomtits, NI Kiwi, and Kakariki. There is a 16m canopy tower and excellent, easy access walking tracks throughout the enclosure.

New meeting room

Our monthly meetings will be in a new room for 2010 - still at Unitec, and in Building 115.

The new room is Rm 1028, (room code 115-1028).

This room is close to the previous one, and direction notices will be up in Building 115 on the night of the meeting. If you want more information on location, or you get lost on the night, you can phone Mel Galbraith on 027-387-9720.

Frigatebird takes refuge on the North Shore

By Mel Galbraith

I do not often have the time to seek out some of the exciting vagrants that turn up in New Zealand from time-to-time, but on the evening of 19th January a phone call to me while attending a dinner engagement initiated a fast deployment to Little Shoal Bay in Northcote - much to the consternation of my host!

Colleagues Tony and Dinah Holman had alerted me to what they had identified as a frigatebird hovering over their house, attended by a flock of agitated Black-backed gulls.

When I arrived, Tony and Dinah's description, supported by a handy field guide, certainly fitted the identification of a frigatebird (the beak and tail shape are hard to mistake).

It was just on dusk, with sufficient light to spot the bird sitting in a flat-topped pine tree for its evening roost and to confirm the sighting.



Lesser Frigatebird in pine tree at Little Shoal Bay. (Photo: Mel Galbraith)

I returned to the tree at daybreak the following day, and was able to sight the bird through a telescope and take some grainy photos.

The general consensus is that it was a female Lesser Frigatebird, the field identification characteristics supporting this identification being the black throat and white breast patch extending to the nape.

Unfortunately, I had to leave before the bird flew from its roost at about 8.10am.

We can surmise that the weather pattern at the time of a fast moving cyclone (cyclone Zelda) moving out of the Coral Sea to NZ waters may have brought the bird south.

Needless-to-say, I have promised to try for an uninterrupted dinner with my host on another occasion!

More Auckland region sightings on Page 6

Cyclone makes for wet and windy Peninsula picnic

In the middle of the long, hot summer in Auckland the day of the annual Auckland OSNZ picnic dawned with the prospect of not one but two tropical cyclones heading our way. Despite the wind and rain three intrepid souls braved the elements and met up at Harbour View Walkway on Te Atatu Peninsula.

The 'picnic' was a hastily eaten sandwich sheltering behind car doors while we watched windsurfers having a marvellous time in the wild weather. **It was high-tide while we were there, and we were treated to 'fly-pasts' at very close quarters of South Island Pied Oystercatchers seeking drier ground.** Our walk took us along the pathway above the wetland, taking detours around the ponds which filter runoff from the land. Then the wind seemed to drop and the rain stopped, giving us a brief respite to enjoy the views back to the city.

A white-fronted tern was observed carrying a fish. As it seemed late in the season for courtship rituals the behaviour suggests the tern had nested and was feeding young. The walkway also goes around the end of the peninsula, which is very pleasant. It is worthwhile visiting the area on an incoming tide as other species have previously been observed feeding on the mudflats. **Observers:** Mel Galbraith, John Simmons, Chris Thompson. **Species (24):** Mallard, Little Shag, Swamp Harrier, Pukeko, SIPO, VOC, Red-billed Gull, Black-backed Gull, Caspian Tern, White-fronted Tern, Spotted Dove, Magpie, Fantail, Sky Lark, Welcome Swallow, Blackbird, Song Thrush, Silver-eye, Starling, Myna, Yellowhammer, Chaffinch, House Sparrow, Hen.



Te Atatu Peninsula (Photo: Mel Galbraith).



Pest control vital to conservation success

Funding for pest control is vital to ensuring the survival of many of French Polynesia's endangered birds.

Black rats and feral cats, are some of the invasive pests threatening critically endangered birds like the Tahiti Petrel, Tahiti Monarch, Polynesian Ground Dove, and Tuamotu Kingfisher. Other pests include introduced birds such as Indian Mynas and Bulbuls.

The most successful endemic birds of French Polynesia, are those on islands that are free of Black Rats (*Rattus rattus*, also known as Ship Rat).

The lack of Black Rats on some islands have seen the success of birds such as the brightly coloured 'Ura' lorikeet, (*Vini kuhlii*) on Rimatara Island (in the Society Islands), and the 'Pahiti' or Ultramarine Lorikeet, (*Vini ultramarina*), on Ua Huka Island in the Marquesas.

On the main island of Tahiti, the Tahiti Petrel, is threatened by rats, cats and pigs, says Laurent Yen, a conservation field officer for Manu (the Ornithological Society of Polynesia), who was visiting New Zealand as a guest of the IUCN's Pacific Invasive Initiative's exchange programme.

"There is also a problem with these birds being attracted by settlement lights and crash landing into gardens and onto roads, so one task is to make people aware they can contact Manu to

retrieve the bird, he says. "These birds are rehabilitated and released by Manu."

French Polynesia has 115 coral atolls and volcanic islands with a combined surface area of some 4000 km² scattered across more than 4 million km² of the tropical South Pacific.

This area is an Overseas Territory of France and became autonomous in 1984. It has a population of about 220,000 people, most of whom live in Tahiti and Moorea.

French Polynesia includes five administrative areas; the Windward Islands, Leeward Islands, Tuamotu-Gambier Archipelago, Marquesas Archipelago and the Austral Islands.

Manu SOP was established in 1990, and looks after birds in an area the size of Europe, but scattered on islands in a large expanse of ocean. The Society was started by bird watchers, and was officially recognised as an NGO dedicated to bird conservation by the French Polynesian Government in 1999. It later became affiliated to avian conservation organisation, Birdlife International, and a full partner in 2010.

SOP Manu's conservation programmes are diversified and focus on seabirds and endemic landbirds. The programmes include raising public awareness by posters and presentations; monitoring bird populations of interest; monitoring invasive species and if necessary, conducting control or eradication operations.

By Suzi Phillips at <http://bit.ly/gPOEN3>



Rimatara Lorikeets or Ura, (*Vini kuhlii*), survive in small numbers on Rimatara Island in the Society Islands, and on Atiu Island in the Cook Islands where they have been reintroduced.

At left, a pair of fledglings emerge from a nest on Atiu. (Photo: Gerald McCormick).



La Nina impacts on seabirds *Continued from Pg 1*

"What this means is colder than normal water, (though still a lot warmer than our beaches), flows well west into the central Pacific and displaces the very warm equatorial water, so it pushes north and south in the western Pacific," he says.

"This warm water flows south towards Australia bringing with it lots of moisture laden air and therefore high rainfall and flooding in Queensland and New South Wales, and eventually more northeast winds."

"We can also expect more tropical cyclones for northern New Zealand from January to May as the Coral Sea heats up," says Dr Taylort.

The warmer seas to the north of New Zealand and in the Tasman Sea at present, are having a lot of impact on local weather patterns.

In early spring it meant lots of storm events in the north as the anticyclones went south and became stationary east of New Zealand.

As summer has approached the anti-cyclones have settled into the central Tasman Sea and northern New Zealand bringing calmer weather.

"Storms on land with strong wind and heavy rain, are bad news for nesting seabirds," he says. "But calm seas are just as bad as this stops the mixing of water columns that drives productivity in the ocean and these warmer calmer seas are just making it harder for seabirds to find food."

The end result is that lots of seabirds are struggling to feed their chicks this year or get into breeding condition.

Dr Taylort says that problems he has seen so far include lots of very small runty chicks in the Grey-faced Petrel nests at Bethells Beach in the past 10 days, delayed breeding and partners

being late to return to incubate in Sooty and Flesh-footed Shearwater colonies, die offs of Blue Penguin fledglings on northern beaches starting to show up, and now the gannets struggling to feed their chicks.

"Basically its a natural event," he says. "The seabirds are going to have a bad year in 2010/11, but they had an excellent year in 2009/10, so they will cope."

"A lot of chicks and adults will wash up dead or dying this summer and people are going to want to help them, but in the end its natures way of weeding out the weak from the strong."

"Some people will feel they need to help the birds, but it probably wont make a lot of difference as they still need to find food in the ocean once released," he says.

When collecting seabird corpses to examine for starvation, its worth knowing what is the normal weight of these birds and, if its well below that then starvation is the cause, he says.

Little Blue Penguins for example range between 750g and 1800g, but if you have birds dying that are 400-600g, then they died of starvation.

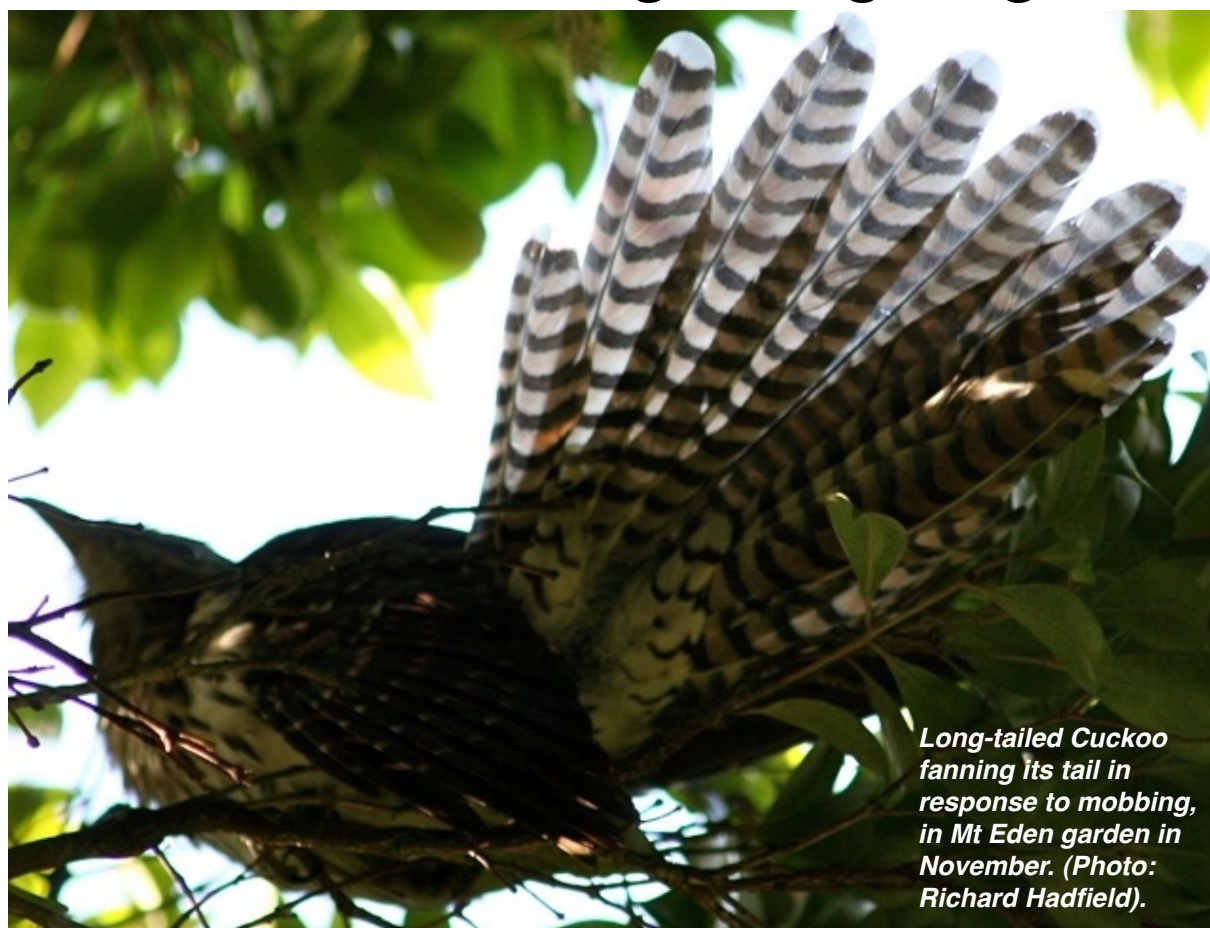
Normal gannets should weigh about 2-2.5 kg, but if the sternum bone is very prominent the bird is dying from hunger, not disease.

Dead birds found by OSNZ members would need to be taken to a Department of Conservation office, if an autopsy is necessary, but Dr Taylort's research project is mainly to determine the cause of death for rare species.

Some other seabird colonies around New Zealand are also experiencing signs of stress from the unusual seasonal weather pattern.

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Recent Auckland Region Sightings



Long-tailed Cuckoo fanning its tail in response to mobbing, in Mt Eden garden in November. (Photo: Richard Hadfield).

Long-tailed Cuckoo Visits Mt Eden - On the evening of Sunday 28th November last year, at about 6:00pm, there was a great commotion in the trees in our yard. We live in Mt Eden in Auckland with about six or seven Tui, and numerous Fantails and Silvereyes, and they were all going crazy. Above is a photo of the intruder, another Long-tailed Cuckoo. The Tuis especially were attacking it with venom. The Cuckoo was a very big bird and made itself bigger by fanning out its tail, (as shown), as it was attacked. It stayed put until about 6:45pm and then moved away. A fairly rare occurrence in central Auckland I would think. Although, in 2004, on the 5th March we had a similar visitation, also announced by mobbing Tui. By their behaviour it would seem that Tui feel that the Long-tailed Cuckoo is a threat to their young or parasitizes their nests. Mind you the Fantails and Silvereyes got pretty excited too and they took quite a while to calm down after it had gone. Richard Hadfield.

Researchers study Fairy Tern ecology at Mangawhai - Steffi Ismar, a researcher from the University of Auckland and Karen Baird from Forest and Bird, have been undertaking a study of NZ Fairy Tern feeding ecology and behaviour at Mangawhai Estuary over this summer. By stationing people at vantage points around the estuary and on the spit at nest sites they have been attempting to document foraging locations and rates to determine the relative importance of the various feeding habitats available to them. They have also been undertaking fish surveys (with Tom Trnski, Auckland Museum) to determine what fish are available to the terns. Volunteer bird observers have been sitting for four hours each day with binoculars and a scope recording the terns' activities ... I joined the crew for a day last week - it was stunning out on the estuary at daybreak. There was a Fairy tern adult with two fledged chicks on the flats nearby, water perfectly calm, some sea mist and stingrays flapping about in the shallows. Chris Gaskin (via BirdingNZ).

Highlights of a visit to Manukapua (Big Sand Island) on the Kaipara Harbour near Tāpapa on January 20th were reported by Erik Forsyth and Phil Hammond, (via BirdingNZ). These included; Black Swan, Bar-tailed Godwit, Red Knot, Double-banded Dotterel, NZ Dotterel, Pacific Golden Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, Little Black Shag, VOC, SIPO, Masked Lapwing, Wrybill, 2x Greater Sand Plover, 11x Whimbrel, Swamp Harrier, 12+ Little Tern, Caspian Tern, White-fronted Tern, Black-backed (Kelp) Gull, and NI Fernbird, and at the carpark, Pheasant, Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Grey Warbler, Song Thrush, Sacred Kingfisher, Blackbird, Silver-eye, House Sparrow, and Starling.

Auckland Activities Programme 2011

- Feb 1** **Monthly meeting 7.30pm: Ornithological potpourri - Members' reports/short talks and regional roundup**
- Feb 12 Saturday 9.15am, Muriwai beach patrol: contact Alan Morris (Ph 480-0252).
- Mar 1** **Monthly meeting 7.30pm: Jules Robson (RSNZ Teacher Fellow 2010), *Kea and lead in their environment*.**
- Mar 12 Saturday 9.15am, Muriwai beach patrol: contact Alan Morris (Ph 4800252).
- Mar 19 Maungatautari Ecological Island (day bus trip, \$30 ?): contact Mel Galbraith (Ph 4801958)
- Mar 20-25 NZ dotterel post-breeding flock counts: informal counts of key flocks (probably midweek to minimize people/vehicle disturbance?), contact Gwenda Pulham (Ph 4805535).
- Apr 5** **Monthly meeting 7.30pm: Dr Matt Rayner (NIWA), *Population studies of Cook's petrel in the Hauraki Gulf*.**
- Apr 16 Saturday 9.15am, Muriwai beach patrol: contact Alan Morris (4800252).
- Apr 16 South Kaipara Lakes Dabchick Survey: contact Michael Taylor (Ph 5249234).
- May 3** **Monthly meeting 7.30pm: John Stewart (OSNZ Ak), *Seabirds of the Copeland Bird Observatory, North Ireland*.**
- May 14 Saturday 9.15am, Muriwai beach patrol: contact Alan Morris (Ph 4800252).
- June 4-6 ANNUAL AGM and SCIENTIFIC DAY, Wellington (Queen's Birthday weekend).
- Jun 7** **Monthly meeting 7.30pm: Robin Gardner-Gee (Motuora Restoration Soc), *Restoring seabirds on modified islands - the Motuora experience*.**
- Jun 11 Saturday 9.15am, Muriwai beach patrol: contact Alan Morris (Ph 4800252).
- Jun 11 Saturday, Mangawhai wader census: contact Gwenda Pulham (Ph 4805535).
- Jun 19 Sunday, Firth of Thames wader census: contact Adrian Riegen (Ph 8149741).
- Jul 2 Saturday, Kaipara wader census: contact Adrian Riegen (Ph 8149741).
- Jul 3 Sunday, Manukau wader census: north - contact Phil Hammond (Ph 3601156); south - contact Tony Habraken (09-2385284); Waitemata Census - contact Adrian Riegen (Ph 8149741).
- Jul 5** **Monthly meeting 7.30pm: Rosemary Barraclough (Massey University), *Avian blood parasites in NZ***
- Jul 9 Saturday 9.15am, Muriwai beach patrol: contact Alan Morris (Ph 4800252).

**For the latest information on contacts, speakers, and venue locations
contact Mel Galbraith at
mgalbraith@unitec.ac.nz or phone 4801958 (AH) / 8154321 x 7320 (W)**



Laysan Albatross off the coast of Mexico. (Photo: Federico Mendez Sanchez).

Island Restoration - a Mexican Perspective

The numerous islands of Mexico's north-east have, through the presence of invasive species, suffered losses to biodiversity in similar ways to New Zealand.

Actively engaged in studies and practical restoration measures are three students from Mexico currently at Auckland University. Join us as Luciana Luna Mendoza, Araceli Samaniego Herrera, and Federico Mendez Sanchez tell of their activities on Guadalupe and other islands protecting such species as the Laysan albatross.

25th March at 7.30pm
Waitakere Golf Club, Falls Road, Waitakere
Refreshments available
Organised by Ark in the Park

RSVP to John Sumich at cjnk@xtra.co.nz

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