

The Wrybill

Newsletter of the Canterbury Region,
Ornithological Society of New Zealand

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October 2015

What's on at OSNZ Canterbury:
October 2015 to February 2016

Indoor Meetings

Evening Meetings take place at 7.30 pm on the last Monday of the month at Mahaanui Area DOC Office, 31 Nga Mahi Road, off Blenheim Road, Sockburn. Plenty of parking is available.

20 November – Ron will do a short background to the Black stilt recovery programme. We will then have a discussion about the merits of the plan to transfer juveniles to a coastal location north of Christchurch. If there is time we will show some photos taken by Udo Beneke in Ecuador.

29 February 2016 – Member's Night.
Contributions of around ten minutes, either showing photos or talks, are welcome. If you'd like to take part, please contact Jan on 322 7178.

Field Trips

14 November – **Ashley River Bird Survey**. Meet at 8:30am at the picnic area on the south side of the Rangiora/Loburn Road Bridge. Wear boots and shoes to get wet (NOT gumboots), and also bring a change of clothes in case you fall in, although this is not very likely. Groups cover different sections of the river and are carpooled around to the start and fetched from the finish. It is a good idea to carry lunch with you, in case

of delay. We can carpool from Belfast if enough people want to come out from Christchurch. If you want to come, contact Bev on 03 313 7009 or birdiebev@xtra.co.nz

28 November – **Summer Wader Count of Lake Ellesmere**. Other sites are covered within a week of the 28th. Meet at the far end of Embankment Road, Greenpark, to get into different groups to cover sections of the lake shore. Bring shoes or boots for muddy conditions, sunscreen, hats, waterproof jackets, binoculars and telescopes if you have one. Notebooks and maps are provided. The count will be delayed to the 29th if the weather is too bad. If you want to come, please contact Jan on 322 7187. Also let Jan know whether you want a BBQ this year, as it has not yet been decided.

13 February 2016 – **All Bird Count of Lake Ellesmere**, and on other days wader counts at different sites. Contact Jan on 322 7178. More details next year.

Rambles

17 November – **Styx Mill Reserve**. Meet at 9:30 am at the carpark on Styx Mill Road. Please let Bev know if you are coming - 03 313 7009 or birdiebev@xtra.co.nz.

Profile of a Local Birder - Andrew Crossland



Andrew first 'noticed' birds as a 7yr old visiting his Granddad in Auckland. The lawn had recently been resown and there were lots of Yellowhammers doing what they do best, picking up seed. He says he got into birding proper about age 14 in 1984 when a "friend and I stumbled across a Pied Stilt colony in the Heathcote loop area and decided to build a hide and monitor the nests. My main recreation then was biking [I had cycled around the top half of the SI when I was 13 and often did rides around the estuary and up on the Port Hills]. I got some basic bird books and then for Christmas 1984 got the Falla, Sibson and Turbott Field Guide which was a pretty important 'source of all knowledge' in the early days. This led me to start exploring the estuary, particularly the Linwood paddocks area, Sandy Point and the oxidation ponds, where I began to find some cool birds like a flock of 7 Black-tailed Godwits, Pacific Golden Plovers, Pectoral Sandpiper, etc."

By the time he was 14, he was frequently at the estuary, walking the shoreline, making copious notes and sketches of the birds he saw. It was here one day in 1985 that he bumped into Kathleen Harrison and Sheila Petch, who showed him the Hoary-headed Grebe they were twitching, and he showed them his notes. They recognised an avid birder in the making and encouraged him all they could by taking him with them to Lake Ellesmere and other watery places. Andrew moaned once about the long grass and wet conditions they were ploughing

through, only to be told by Sheila that when he was her age [40+ yrs. older] he'd have cause to moan!

He and Peter Langlands teamed up to do monthly counts of the Bromley Sewage Ponds. "I moved from pushbike to motorbike in mid 1986 which meant all of a sudden I could explore far and wide and I began to do regular counts around the whole estuary and further afield to places like Brooklands, Upper Lyttelton Harbour, Travis Wetland and the Motueka-Riwaka-Marahau areas in Nelson etc. At that time I was near top at my school in English, History and Geography so I was unable to study Biology due to timetable clashes and the school's fear of losing grade allocations for the subject I'd have had to drop to pick up Biology. So thankfully I escaped the normal biology degree road to ornithology and learnt what I did from a lot of hands on study [particularly wetland bird counting] and from interacting with people active in the field. I never had a mentor, but I did have a lot of interaction with knowledgeable people. Most influential among them were Kathleen and Sheila, Jenny Hawkins, Barrie Heather, Colin O'Donnell, Paul Sagar, Peter Reese, Brian Bell, Ken Hughey, Geoff Tunnicliffe, Tony Crocker, Ron Nilsson, Stu Moore, Derek Onley, Chris Challies, and David Crockett."

Andrew joined OSNZ around 1987, but didn't often go to meetings as he was over-awed by the 'big names' then in the local group. Funnily enough, that's what put me (Jan) off going to meetings in the 1970s and 80s too. "Probably the most influential early birding trips were the junior field course at Farewell Spit, [followed by a period from 1988 to 1994 when I joined the Nelson OSNZ for almost every Farewell Spit census] and most of the OSNZ AGMs I attended from 1988 to 1993. There was also regular interaction and friendly competition from other 'young turks' in the birding world at the time, such as Phil Battley, Peter Langlands, Brent Stevenson, the Bell boys, Paul Scofield, Alan Tennyson, Paul Cuming etc. A little later on I teamed up with Scott Butcher for a huge number

of birding missions and latterly with Phil Crutchley and Niall Mugan.”

In 1985, the discovery of NZ's first Asiatic Dowitcher at the Avon/Heathcote estuary led to a life-long interest in this species and searches, starting in 1994, for this bird's wintering grounds in Indonesia. That led to a whole new ornithological 'career' in SE Asia and the discovery of all sorts of rare birds, as well as doubling the world's population of Asiatic Dowitchers.

Andrew has written many papers and short notes, both for *Notornis* and the *Tattler* [the Australian Wader Study Group journal, now online]. His enthusiasm for bird study is quite astonishing. He has records of counts going back decades and has compiled lists of bird species for several local sites that rival any other birder's. He says he has something like another 100 papers he wants to write! His work with the Christchurch City Council as Park Ranger/Ornithologist over nearly two decades has resulted in fantastic progress at reserves, with birds being attracted where they never were before. He has written for newspapers, given talks to the public, got interest groups going and suffered a lot of frustration through never being given enough resources for what he wants to accomplish.

By Jan Walker

A Review of The Origin of Birds – a Presentation by Professor Scott Edwards

Back when I was just an undergraduate, all puppy-like enthusiasm and delusions of grandeur, I wrote an essay on dinosaurs for a physiology class. The self-chosen subject was dinosaur metabolism, and it relied very heavily on the visionary thinking of Robert Bakker from Harvard University, who, not satisfied with merely describing dinosaurs, wanted to figure out what we could tell about dinosaur soft organ-powered metabolism from palaeontology combined with comparative physiology of their

closest surviving relatives. I got an A and a comment that my work lacked diversity of reference material. That was because there were few if any other references I could have chosen; Robert Bakker was a genius ahead of his time, and Scott Edwards is both his protégé and clearly a visionary in his own right.

The talk covered a number of topics which followed the theme of establishing what we can learn about dinosaurs from birds and vice versa. The link between birds and dinosaurs, especially that branch known as theropoda which includes velociraptors and tyrannosaurus, has been well established from fossils, but some of the details are not clear. For example, feathers are essential for flying, but did they arise before flight or with it? How did flying evolve at all, and did the theropod ancestors of birds have the high speed metabolism that powers bird flight and behaviour?

Theropod skeletons suggest animals that were active hunters. Professor Edwards summed up recent work used to establish the high metabolic rate that powered the hunting behaviour of Tyrannosaurus and family. It turns out that there is an almost universal relationship within vertebrates between cell size, genome size and metabolic rate. Birds and bats have remarkably small genomes, small cells and a high metabolic rate, while other warm-blooded animals with a less metabolically active lifestyle (myself for example) have larger cells and a genome containing considerable amounts of non-coding DNA. While we don't have access to dino DNA or metabolic indicators such as heart rate or body temperature, we can examine the microscopic holes in fossil bones from osteocytes (bone cells) and compare those to a wide range of living animals. The small cells in theropod bones indicate a high energy lifestyle and backing this up is evidence from theropod skeletons that these animals had highly sophisticated lungs with a series of air-sacs, just like birds.

Feathers, too, appear well in advance of flight, and numerous recent fossils from China have not only shown that theropods were feathered,

but also that that these feathers were often brightly patterned. The essential ingredients for modern birds, that is, feathers, fancy lungs, and a penchant for hyperactivity, were in place well before, and within dinosaurs that lived alongside the first birds (e.g., archaeopteryx). The evolution of flight itself might have involved optimising a lifestyle of jumping upwards or gliding down from trees, but in either case the main changes from dinosaur to bird were in those parts of the anatomy made up of a particular group of proteins called the hard keratins. In mammals, hard keratins make up hair, nails, hooves and horns – lightweight self-renewing armour. In bird feathers, beaks and claws hard keratins provide flexible strength and reduced weight.

The last part of Professor Edward's talk followed his team's recent research comparing the genomes of keratins and feather development related genes across a wide range of species. The results of that study indicated that most of the keratin genes and all of the regulatory genes now associated with feather development were present before the evolution of dinosaurs and, in fact, we also have them, although in us these same genes perform different regulatory functions. Curiously some of the feather regulation genes (e.g., insulin-like growth factor binding protein) are widely involved in regulating body size in vertebrates and this may indicate that small body size preceded the evolution of flight. For my part, I found it both amazing and impressive how comparative physiology and genomics can inform us about the detailed life and origin of modern species. Given their clear origin as fast-moving flesh-eating hunters, I may never turn my back on a sparrow again.

By Duane Harland

August Field Trip Report

On the 22nd of August Jan, Sandra, Claire, Colleen, Di and I did a beach patrol along a four or five kilometer stretch of South New Brighton

Beach. The idea was to find and if possible identify any seabird carcasses or skeletal remains we found. Unfortunately due to the strong westerly winds we had been having in the previous few months the pickings were rather slim, as any birds that were killed or would have usually been forced onto landfall were being pushed further out to sea. Because of this we found zero whole birds to identify, however we were lucky enough to chance upon two partial wings belonging to red-billed gulls.

The find of the trip was made when I chanced upon a rather large skull above the high-tide line. There was subsequent debate as to the species of origin due to its large size it was narrowed down to either a Caspian Tern or a lesser Black-backed Gull. Jan kindly sent a photo of it to Dr. Colin Miskelly of Te Papa who confirmed our suspicions of it being a Caspian Tern.



Caspian tern skull. Photo by Sandra Wallace.

Notable birds seen: 10 White-Fronted Terns fishing offshore, a lone Gannet, 10+ Red-billed gulls. On the dunes were the winter mixed flocks of finches, with large numbers of goldfinches and yellow-hammers, with a single bellbird heard. Also of note was a lone juvenile seal of around 1m looking very skinny who headed out to sea rapidly after being disturbed by some dogs. Thank you to Jan for organizing the trip and bringing the I.D. keys and her expert knowledge and a big thanks to everyone else above who joined us on the sunny winters day.

By David Thomas

Recent Happenings

Both our August and September evening meetings featured speakers from DoC. In August Anita Spencer shared some of the work she has been doing as a part of a public-private partnership with a local engineering firm, building and installing breeding platforms for Crested grebes on the Kaituna river. Crested grebes traditionally breed on high country lakes but recently some have tried breeding on the Kaituna River. It's variable flow meant their efforts often failed. Man-made platforms that rise and fall with the river will hopefully help. It was interesting to hear of the bureaucratic and engineering background to this project and we look forward to seeing the success of these platforms in years to come.

In September Michelle Crowell gave a very balanced presentation on the risks and benefits of aerial 1080 drops to Kea. In 15 operations 24 Kea died, 20 of these in just three operations. It seems that there are risky sites where Kea are more likely to die and safe sites where none died. As yet there is no definitive answer as to what makes a site safe or risky. On the positive side of the ledger 1080 drops have a positive influence on the productivity of Kea nests. After a beech mast those nests in areas with 1080 fledged four times as many chicks as those in areas without 1080. Much work could still be done to try and improve the safety of 1080 for Keas. In the interim the aim is to ensure that every 1080 drop in Kea habitat leads to a reduction in the stoat population. Any loss of life to adult Kea should thus be compensated for by increased productivity from Kea nests. Septembers' meeting wrapped up with Nick Allen giving us a brief glimpse of birding in South Korea at places like Upo Wetlands and Seosan and sharing some of his photos with us.

Septembers' planned field trip – assisting with a plantout near the LII - had to be cancelled since the event was oversubscribed. Instead Jan, Kath, and Jill explored around Lake Ellesmere and the mouth of the Kaituna River. A few

Crested grebes were spotted and they also saw some of grebe platforms that Anita had spoken about. In October Jan, Sheila, Sandra, Eleanor, Peter and Jill headed inland. Our first stop was McHugh's Forest, the remnants of a pine plantation just outside Darfield. There was a good variety of introduced species to be seen plus fantails and Grey warblers. The main highlight was the sighting of a Little owl. We'd been alerted to its presence by the loud alarm calls of finches! After lunch we visited two patches of native bush near Springfield. Bird life, especially native species, was not as evident as we'd hoped with Kowai Bush revealing just eight species and Lordes Bush six. Bellbirds were the native of note.

Over the past three months Bev's mid week-rambles have taken us to Lake Ellesmere, Travis Wetland and the Ashley Estuary. Peter's keen eyes were the first to spot the Glossy ibis while at Travis, while at the Ashley Estuary Sheila picked up a Grey-tailed tattler. We all observed the female Black stilt who has been present at the Ashley Estuary for many month mating with a male Pied stilt. Such interbreeding is a potential problem with plans to release numbers of Black stilt to the area.

By Sandra Wallace

Red-Billed Gull Survey

As you know, the Red-billed gull population is declining. As part of a campaign to raise awareness and monitor populations, the public is being asked to help count the number of nests and birds at any breeding colonies. To find out more or to submit your data, go to Birds New Zealand's website or follow this link - <http://www.osnz.org.nz/National-Red-Billed-Gull-Online-Form>.

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Recent Sightings

Contributors

AC – Andrew Crossland; AE - Albatross Encounter; DR – David Riddell; GB – Grahame Bell; JW – Jan Walker; KR - Kieran Rowe; NM – Nikki McArthur; PC – Phil Crutchley; PS – Paul Sagar; SP - Sheila Petch; SW – Steve Wratten

August

Black-fronted dotterel, 4, Banded dotterel, 15, Black-fronted tern, 5, Black-billed gull, 97, Washdyke Lagoon, 12/8, PS.
Cattle egret, 16, Drain Road/Lake Road/Colletts Road area, 13/8, JW.
Wrybill, 23, Ruddy turnstone, 1, Bar-tailed godwit, 26, Ashley Estuary, 13/8, JW.
Cirl bunting, 2, Victoria Park, 24/8, PC.
Wrybill, 11, Avon-Heathcote Estuary, 24/8, AC.
Wrybill, 18, Avon-Heathcote Estuary, 27/8, GB.

September

Wrybill, 70, Jarvis Road, 6/9, JW.
Little egret, 1, Lake Ellesmere, 9/9, DR.
Wrybill, 5, Avon-Heathcote Estuary, 11/9, JW.
Bar-tailed godwits, 210+, Avon-Heathcote Estuary, 14/9, AC.
Red-necked stint, 23, Sharp-tailed sandpiper, 2, Curlew sandpiper, 1, Ruddy turnstone, 1, Bar-tailed godwit, 1, Wrybill, 40+, Black-billed gulls, 200-300, Kaitorete Spit, 15/9, AC.
Bar-tailed godwit, 22, Banded dotterel, 4, Gull-billed tern, 1, Embankment Road, 16/9, JW.
Hutton's shearwater, 50000+, Barney's Rock (Kaikoura), 29/9, NM .

October

Cirl bunting, Halswell Quarry Park, 8/10, JW.
Rock wren, 1, Otira Valley, 13/10, DR.
Grey-tailed tattler, 1, Black stilt, 1, Ashley Estuary, 14/10, SP.
Red-necked stint, 14, Pectoral sandpiper, 1, Curlew sandpiper, 1, Kaitorete Spit, 14/10, AC.
Red-necked stint, 14, Wrybill, 60+, Banded dotterel, 12, Embankment Road, 17/10, KR.

Ruddy turnstone, 2, Curlew sandpipers, 2, Red-necked stint, 20, Kaitorete Spit, 18/10, JW.
Banded dotterel, 10, Black-billed gulls, 120, Yarrs Bay, 26/10, SW.
Bar-tailed godwits, 21, Banded dotterel, 6, Lower Selwyn Huts, 26/10, SW.
Grey-headed albatross, 1, Kaikoura, 28/10, AE.



A photo of a Grey-Headed Albatross, one of the interesting species seen in Canterbury in the past few months. Photo courtesy of New Zealand Birds Online.

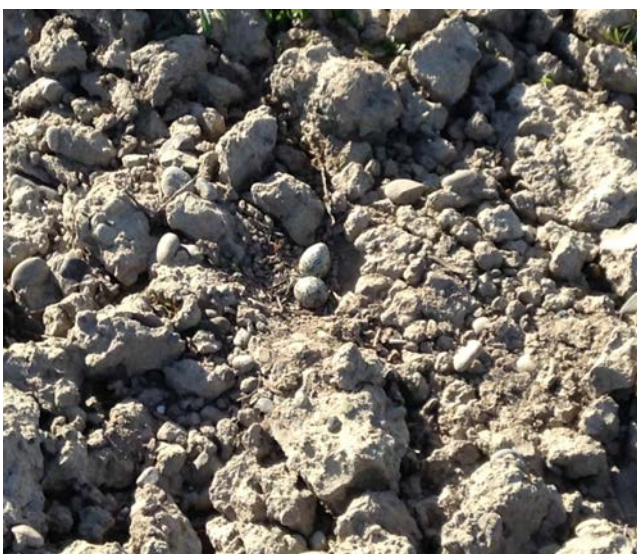
Banded Dotterel Nest



Above: While you cannot see it from this distance, this area in fact contains a Banded dotterel nest. The farmer has left the area surrounding the nest as it is in order to protect the nest

Below: Close up of the Banded dotterel Nest. Two chicks have since hatched and are running around the paddock.

Photos by Bev Alexander.



This is the last Wrybill of the year. Look out for the next issue in February next year. The editor hopes everyone has a happy summer's birding, and looks forward to reading the many interesting articles people submit by the end of January which she can include in next year's Wrybill.

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