



# THE ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND



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## Upper Clarence River and Kaikoura 12-17th December 2011



photos Craig McKenzie

When the idea of another Clarence trip, twenty five years on, was mentioned I was not keen. Cold and wet sprung to mind along with the problem of keeping camera gear dry but accessible. However, spending a few days around Kaikoura did appeal so I offered to drive. It turned out Mary Thompson made the same offer.

After a morning of preparation and watching the rafts and kayaks drift away it was time to see what birds we could find on the upper Clarence. It didn't take long to find a colony of Black-fronted Terns. They were on a large grassed island formed where the river split in to two channels. We had lunch here watching the comings and goings with the chicks being fed. Small fish, worms and dragon flies were on the menu. One thing I had not seen before was the food being washed before being presented to the chicks. This was done either standing on the river shore or flying along and repeatedly dunking. It was a very hot afternoon and if there was a shade tree we may have stayed longer.

We were heading for Lake Tennyson, the source of the Clarence, to camp for the night. Further up the valley we saw more tern activity with birds feeding over the grass flats. Walking closer we found another smaller colony, also where the river split. This time they appeared to be on eggs. For once the wind and the light were from behind so there was an opportunity for a few quick photographs before leaving them in peace.

Lake Tennyson turned out to be a rather bleak place in the westerly wind. The amusement while preparing tea was spotting the skylarks singing high in the clear blue sky. Other bird life was sparse with just Harriers, Paradise duck, Black-backed gull, Black shag and a single Welcome Swallow seen. It was lightly raining in the morning as we headed further up the pylon road to the Tarndale ponds. The first pond had nothing on it. The walk between lakes was longer than it appeared from the map so we only managed distant views over the lakes but did see Pied Stilts, Pied Oystercatchers, Black Shag, Mallard and Canada Geese. Returning to our camp it was still raining so we decided the weather could only get better if we headed east to the coast. Very likely a good idea as the next days were to bring flooding to Nelson.

On the way back down the Clarence we found another tern colony just one or two kilometres downstream from yesterday's second. Once again the river split and like the others there were two or three Banded Dotterels in attendance. At an estimated 30 birds this was about the same size as the colony just up the river and half the size of the one downstream. Picking up the second car left in a camp ground in Hamner Springs we heard the familiar sound of a Falcon kekking followed by an all too brief sighting of it

flying through the pines. I did find the call much softer than I have been used to - think Steve Lawrence and speakers on the top of his vehicle.

The number of species seen so far was quite low and we discussed what birds we might see along the Kaikoura coast that we do not see around Dunedin. Reef Heron was one such bird that I had seen on an earlier trip. I had followed it along the rocky coast near Goose Bay for a mile or more before managing to photograph it at the Paia Point camping area. In the hope that history might repeat this seemed as good a place as any to head for the night. Another tern colony and a Black-billed Gull colony were spotted from the passing bay on the long bridge over the Waiau River near the township of Waiau.

The Reef Heron was not there but we did see our first Pied Shag along with Red-billed Gulls that were intent on snatching any unattended food during tea preparation. Offshore and out to sea we had binocular views of Caspian Tern, White-fronted Tern, Gannet, Shearwaters and Albatross. While we could see into the distance there was a strange haze along the coast and the threatening rain held off until it was time to crawl into our tents.

After breakfast there was still intermittent light rain so we headed for the peninsula hoping to get away from it. On an Albatross Encounter trip I had been shown a shorebird hot spot before we headed out on the boat. It was the point just past the wharf at the end of town on the northern side of the peninsula down a road that looks like you are heading into someone's driveway. Here we immediately found White-faced Heron and Variable Oystercatcher. The nice thing about the Oystercatcher is that it was a variable with plumage half way between pied and black. Then Mary noticed that the shag perched on a rock was no longer a shag. It had been displaced to another rock by a Reef Heron. With the tide going out I was able to negotiate the rock platform and get close enough for some photographs. There was still haze about so I had to get close before the photograph became clear. It was busy preening so was unperturbed by my approach and departure. Eventually, it left and headed further out onto the peninsula. We followed.

For the rest of our stay we continued to see this Reef Heron on the northern side of the peninsula. The weather was always southerly so this was the sheltered side. We had views of it living up to its name out on the

reefs feeding and deftly avoiding the incoming waves. In Armers Bay we saw it fishing and discovered how easy it was to overlook when it was still and hunched over in its feeding position. I was given another photo opportunity while it was concentrating and saw it catch four fish in about fifteen minutes. The Reef heron was the highlight of the trip for me.

The rocky points on the end of the Kaikoura Peninsula are a major Red-billed Gull and White-fronted-tern nesting areas. There are signs at the base of these points advising that we are not to proceed past them for that reason. Luckily, the birds cannot read and a colony of gulls and a closer colony of terns nested in an area we were allowed. Unlike the Black-fronted Terns we could get close enough to the White-fronted Terns for viewing and photographing without them showing any signs of disturbance. Adults were continually bringing in fish. If you followed one into the chaos of the colony you could see that it would find its mate who would allow a chick to pop its head out for the fish before being promptly tucked away. We left as the rain was starting to get heavier and opted to stay in a cabin for the rest of the trip.

Turnstones are another bird I had heard could be found on the peninsula. The next morning was when I managed to get close to the fishing Reef Heron. When I had finished Mary told me she had found Turnstones. It was a real pleasure being with someone that found the next bird to photograph rather than urging you to hurry up. They were on a small rocky point with a flock of Variable Oystercatchers. We approached opposite the side Mary saw them from. The tide was going out and it looked like they were going to disburse along the beach towards us. I decided to try halving the distance but the three or four White-faced Herons I could see turned into a flock of about a dozen spooked ones. They also spooked the Oystercatchers and the Turnstones back onto the point. As there was no longer anything on the beach I moved to the base of the point and lay down behind some seaweed. After a short wait the Oystercatchers started moving back onto the beach and were soon followed by the Turnstones. You have to love it when a plan works out. This was the closest I have ever managed to get to Turnstones.

From there we headed to the south side of the peninsula. This made us realise just how much we were sheltered on the other side. I only mention this excursion because Mary came up with a novel way of reading the bands of some Red-billed Gulls that were too far away. Some of our

mouldy bread bought them a lot closer. I must remember to stop taking Vogels bread on trips. It goes mouldy in short order every time. We didn't tell Bruce why his car ended up so dirty.

On our last morning before picking up the river travellers we went back looking for the turnstones. It was windier and they were not there on the exposed rocks so we went back to the point we originally saw the Reef Heron. About forty of them were there tucked into the shelter of the rocks. It truly was a hot spot.

More photographs at [www.flickr.com/photos/craigmckenzie](http://www.flickr.com/photos/craigmckenzie)  
Craig McKenzie

### **A Rock Wren Nest in Gertrude Valley, Boxing Day, 2011**



Mary T and Sue Galloway set out to find Rock Wren up the Gertrude Valley; Boxing Day was extraordinarily perfect weather and many people were climbing to the Saddle but my plan and hope was to find Rock Wren as I had never seen one. We had climbed a short distance up the first steep part

through alpine plants in a rock fall, and when stopping for a breather heard tst/tst sounds. Soon after a small bird flew down a dry creek bed and alighted on a rock near us, bobbed up and down, was joined by female also bobbing up and down – the perfect introduction to Rock Wren! With further observation it turned out that they had a nest under a large overhanging rock sheltered by a dracophyllum bush. We watched the nest: 12:06 first sighting; 12:20, male left nest with faecal sac, 12:24 male returned with moth, 12:30 female returned with food, 12:36 male out of nest, female in, 12:40 female out with faecal sac, 12:49 male back and out .....1:41 female out with faecal sac, 1:47 male out, 1:53 female with moth and green caterpillar (left via ‘back door’), 1:55 male removed faecal sac, 2:02 male in with food and out, 2:08 male back with moth, 2:10 female feeding, 2:24 female out with faecal sac, 2:27 male back with moth and caterpillar, then no action for 20 minutes; reluctantly headed back down valley, but very satisfied. Craig McKenzie went the following weekend and saw and photographed the fledged family. **Mary Thompson**

## Bittern survey at Waihola/Waipori



**Captain Sue up the Waipori River**

Over the years, bitterns have been heard or seen sporadically near Lake Waihola. In November and December a small team used sound recorders (borrowed from DoC – thanks to Emma Williams and Colin O’Donnell) to determine their status. Mary Thompson led the way, assisted by Murray Efford, Sue Galloway and Lesley Gowans. Recorders were placed for 2–4 days at 46 sites around Lakes Waihola and Waipori and the intervening wetlands. Access varied from ‘easy’ (off tracks in the Sinclair Wetlands and the Titri Road DoC reserve) to ‘not so easy’ (by canoe along various river channels, and across farmland). Thanks to all the

landowners for tolerating and even actively assisting our efforts. Each recorder was set to run for about 3 hours in the evening and 2 hours before dawn; even allowing for 3 failures there were over 900 hours of recordings. The recordings richly document the wildlife (including 2 frog species) and it will be some time before they’re fully analysed. Bittern booms are a characteristic low sound about 150–200 Hz likened to ‘blowing over the top of a bottle’ – not to be confused with cows, sheep, black swans, truck brakes, trains etc.! Wind noise made recordings unusable on many days, but booming bitterns could be heard at a cluster of sites in and around Sinclair Wetlands. The population may be small – perhaps only 3–4 males – but the continued presence of bitterns is good news for the locals working to restore the wetlands.

**Murray Efford**

## **Dinner with the Albatrosses: Report of November Indoor Meeting.**

The November meeting was a chance to celebrate the end of the Harbour Survey and to thank Bruce McKinlay for his role in this, and to do something different for the last meeting of the year. Twenty-two members gathered at the Albatross Centre for dinner prior to the meeting. Nice views of many white-faced herons and feeding godwits at Harwood were seen by those who made the detour on their trip down the Peninsula. The red-billed gull colony was thriving although the wind and rain early in the evening made for hurried viewing. Several albatross flew by the centre while we were having dinner.

The evening was capped off with a special talk by Neville Peat on Lance Richdale and his pioneering work with the albatross and penguins on the Peninsula and with the petrels and prions on Whero Island. Richdale saw his first albatross in 1936 and the first chick fledged in 1938 due to Richdale's care; now the colony numbers 150-200 birds. Richdale's studies of penguins and other seabirds were ground-breaking and he was well known throughout the world; he was one of the first to study the behaviour of birds. Neville gave us many incites? into the man and showed some rare photographs. The book, 'Seabird Genius' is a must.



photo: Craig McKenzie

## **Dead Albatrosses**

Graham Parker in the Falkland Islands recently emailed –

“You may be interested to know that a banded Southern Royal was killed on one of the trawlers I worked on in November. I wasn't on the vessel but fortunately the Bosun kept the band from the previous week. The bird was banded in 1970 on Campbell Island. Interesting also as so many of these bird were 'de-banded' just a few years ago because of all the injuries that were recorded. I only know of one other record of a Southern Royal death here in the Falklands but a recent paper from Argentina recorded 7 in one year if I recall correctly.”

## Hawksbury Lagoon Summer Count

Species	22 Jan 2012	23 Jan 2011
Little Shag		2
Black Swan	18	115
Paradise Duck	68	9
Canada Goose	55	43
Domestic Goose	8	25
Hybrid Goose	21	11
Mallard/Grey Duck	103	508
N.Z. Shoveler	158	205
Grey Teal	621	655
NZ Scaup		2
Pied Stilt	271	226
Spur-winged Plover		3
Black-backed Gull	14	22
Red-billed Gull	47	43
Black-billed Gull	76	1
White-fronted Tern	1	
Caspian Tern	1	
White-faced Heron	1	1
Royal Spoonbill	1	4
Kereru		1
Welcome Swallow	2	36

It seems to have become obligatory in these accounts of the Hawksbury Lagoon surveys to comment first not upon the birds but the weather. This summer the gale sou'wester may have affected the accuracy of the counts to some extent, you had to hold the telescope up as well as still, but it reflected well upon the dedication of Lesley Gowans, Derek Onley and of course your intrepid RR, Mary.

Compared with last year Black Swan numbers were well down, Paradise Duck numbers well up and Canada Geese and hybrid Feral/Canadas increasing to a worrying extent.



photo: Male Canada, female Feral Goose and nine hybrid offspring.

Pied Stilt numbers showed their usual substantial post breeding increase. Grey Teal numbers were much the same as last year but other duck



numbers were down, possibly because water levels were still low after the dry December.



Highlight of the visit was a fledgling Shining Cuckoo being fed by a couple of Grey Warblers – in one of the few sheltered spots in the whole lagoon. There is a role for willows in wetlands after all. **Derek Onley**

## Ornithological Snippets

Glenda a photographer attending the Southern Regional Convention of PSNZ and Roy Hargreaves, a birder from the UK, (but not one local birder, bird watcher, ornithologist call them what you will), saw and photographed **Arctic Terns** at Aramoana on 29 October, 30 November and 1 December. The October and November birds were both immatures, possibly the same bird, but the December bird was an adult and banded as



October immature



December adult

well. One well known (not local) ornithologist who shall be nameless said (jokingly?) if ever there was a case for shooting a bird that was it. Bribes to reveal their identity of this retro-ornithologist will be considered by the editor.

More of Glenda's photos at [www.flickr.com/photos/nzsamphotofanatic/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/nzsamphotofanatic/)

**Scaup** (Papango) with about 8 ducklings were seen by Mary T and Sue Galloway in the wetlands between Lakes Waipori and Waihola when retrieving acoustic monitors on 28th November. The distraction display consisted of female flying/running and flapping wings on the water very loudly and obviously in front of our canoe while the ducklings scrambled for cover at the side- never reappearing while we were there.

Mary T and Sue Galloway saw **Black Shag** colony, with about 30 birds in large willow on south west corner of Lake Tuakitoto, near Kaitangata, on 9th January; also roosting in same willow were at least 13 **Royal Spoonbill**-could they be nesting at such a site? Is it worth checking further? Other birds seen from east side of lake: many **Black Swan** and cygnets, **Mallard**, **Grey Teal**, **Paradise Ducks**(probably congregating to moult), 3 **Pied Stilt**, 3 **Spur-winged Plover**, 4 **Pukeko**, 5 **White-faced Heron**, 2 **Black-backed Gull**, 4 **Harrier Hawks** (one feeding on largish bird) and many dozen **Welcome Swallows**. (Yes, I know, this is the sort of data that should be entered on eBird and I will! Mary – {all these snippets should go on ebird. ed.}). The lake was very shallow and muddy so we didn't paddle the canoe across the lake.

**NZ Falcon** kekking at Supply Bay, Manapouri on 27th and 28th December. Perching sites were found and sounded like young further back in trees. On 8 January yet another NZ Falcon, a female this time was seen leaving the Orokonui Sanctuary and crossing Blueskin Bay towards the Silverpeaks.

There were several **White-fronted Tern** nests with chicks at Lawyers Head on 31 December. Also a colony of about 70 **Red-billed Gull** nests, with most birds still sitting on eggs but some small chicks and about 30 well-fledged chicks (from a previous sitting-most of first nests washed out by stormy weather in Nov.) Christina and Campbell Weston are making a careful record of these colonies. **Red-billed Gulls** and **White-fronted Terns** nested this year on the rocks above the cave at Doctor's Point Beach, Waitati and despite constant problems with dogs, people and the local **Black-backed Gulls** on land and **Arctic Skuas** at sea there were about 30 nests with young of various ages by Christmas and 160 birds including 10 or more fledged young by 10 January.

Derek Onley also recorded 13 **Arctic Skuas** off Shag Point on 11 December, all but one going southwards and more unusually a **Brown Skua** off Warrington on 29 December and another passing south off Aramoana Mole on 20 January.

On 29 November at Roxburgh, below the Clutha R bridge to East Roxburgh, Lesley Gowans saw a large **Black-billed Gull** flock some of which may have been nesting. She thinks they may be there all year.

Len Buchanan counted 60 Pied and 1 **Black Stilt** at the Kaikorai Estuary on 2 December. This is presumably the **Black Stilt** that nested at McIntosh Rd swamp, Brighton as it wasn't there, nor at Kaikourai on 5 December.

At the end of October/beginning of November Josie and Len Buchanan saw 48 **Royal Spoonbills** at the Kaikorai Estuary. Upto 7 have been present in Blueskin Bay over summer, with a maximum of 19 at Hawksbury Lagoon in mid January and “a baker’s dozen” (try putting that in ebird) at Karitane in December.

On 26 December, from Hampden Beach, Alan Baker watched a **Gannet** fishing for 10-15 minutes. He noticed that it was accompanied by 3 **Fluttering/Hutton's shearwaters**. Wherever the **Gannet** went, they followed it, and whenever it dived, they descended on the same place.



Graeme Loh photographed these shearwaters at the mouth of Otago Harbour on 3 January. The pale naped one looks interesting at first glance but is just an odd **Fluttering Shearwater**. And yes they could be **Hutton's Shearwaters** especially as about 70 or so of both species flew past the end of the Aramoana Mole on 20 January but the shortish bill, steepish

forehead and, more convincingly the fact they are moulting suggest they are **Flutterers**. **Hutton's** moult later in the summer.

Along with the 1200 **Bar-tailed Godwits** in Blueskin Bay in December (see February Field trip below) there was one **Siberian Tattler**. Always at the end of the roosting flock at Evansdale, it was regularly chased around by the godwits.

### **New Library Books**

Alan Baker's annual list ornithological books added to Dunedin Public Libraries' collection in 2011:-

Birds : magic moments, by Markus Varesvuo

Birds of New Zealand, by Julian Fitter

Birds of New Zealand, by Rob Suisted

Birds of New Zealand, Hawaii and the central and W Pacific, by Ber van Perlo

Birds of paradise : nature, art & history, by Clifford B. Frith & Dawn W. Frith

Boom & bust : bird stories for a dry country, by Libby Robin

Dog days, raven nights, by John M. Marzluff and Colleen Marzluff

E kuku te kereru : oral histories & recent research into the Banks Peninsula kereru, ed. by Craig Pauling and Heidi Stevens

Endangered birds : a survey of planet Earth's changing ecosystems, by Martin Walters

Feathers : the evolution of a natural miracle, by Thor Hanson

Illustrated encyclopedia of birds. BirdLife International

Kiwi : a natural history, by Isabel C. Castro

New Zealand bird calls, by Lynnette Moon et al.

Parrots of the world, by Joseph M. Forshaw

Penguin, by Frans Lanting

The peregrine ; The hill of summer ; & Diaries, by J.A. Baker

Seabird genius : the story of L.E. Richdale, the royal albatross, and the yellow-eyed penguin, by Neville Peat

The unnatural history of the kakapo, by Scott Mouat [DVD]

Winged sentinels : birds and climate change, by Janice Wormworth

## Notices and Business

### Black-fronted Tern and Black-billed Gull Survey



Prompted partly by Lesley Gowans sighting of hundreds of Black-fronted terns at Aramoana during a Harbour survey, we decided at our local AGM that it was about time we had a better look at where these two endangered species spend the winter.

Black-fronted Terns and Black-billed Gulls start to return to the Otago coast

from their inland breeding areas by the New Year. This year there were four juvenile Black-fronted Terns at Aramoana on 20 January, 80 Black-billed Gulls at Waihola on 24<sup>th</sup> and several thousand on the sand bank in the centre of the Harbour off Cary's Bay on the 25<sup>th</sup>.

Most Black-fronted Terns have left their inland Otago nesting sites by the beginning of February and are best found over autumn and winter along the coast. Not unexpectedly most records are from Otago harbour and the Dunedin area from Taieri Mouth north to Karitane as that is where most of the observers live. The highest number other than Lesley's 375 & 119 at Aramoana in April and May has been Graeme Loh's 312 at Victory beach also in April. Graeme has also recorded them at the mouth of the Waitaki and for more adventurous souls way out to sea. (see ebird). They have also been recorded regularly down south especially around the Balclutha/Clutha R mouth by Richard Schofield.

Black-billed Gulls have a similar coastal distribution in winter but can also turn up in paddocks near the coast, e.g. the Taieri Plain and also at sports fields, play grounds and botanic gardens from Papatowai to Oamaru where they act more like Red-billed Gulls on the look out for lunch time scraps.

Please send details of sightings and any other sites worth looking at to Derek Onley [derekonley@yahoo.com](mailto:derekonley@yahoo.com)

(photo: Juvenile, adult and 1 year old Black-billed Gulls, waiting for lunch, Waihola Campground.)

## **February Field Trip: Where are the Godwits roosting and feeding in Otago?**

Derek Onley reports about 1200 Bar-tailed godwits seen regularly in Blueskin Bay, but this season the godwits have not been seen at Aramoana on at least 6 separate visits. Usually Aramoana is a favoured site for the godwits (at least 300), so why are they not using this area?

We are planning to do a survey of the godwits in the Harbour (Harwood, Aramoana) and estuaries (Hoopers, Papanui, Blueskin) on Sunday 19th February. The high tide is at approx. 3.00 pm) so we would like groups of observers concurrently at all sites for about 1 hour before and 1 hour after high tide to record numbers of birds, time of any movements and feeding behaviours. If possible any banded birds should be noted. We need as many observers as possible for this study. You may not have been involved in previous surveys-this is not a problem-you would be paired up with someone who has done it before, so this is a very good opportunity to spend time out in the field watching this special bird. If you are available for this survey please let Peter Schweigman (455 2790) or Mary Thompson (464 0787) know.

## **Renewal of membership**

OSNZ members will have received Subscription Renewal Notice some time before Christmas and this is easily overlooked at this busy time of year. So this is a gentle reminder. Payment can now be done on-line and this is the preferred method. Check out the OSNZ website. You will probably, like me, have forgotten your username and password; I found that it was an easy matter to request a new password using your email address on the login page. If you have trouble just ask your friendly RR, Mary, to help. Otherwise just send a cheque in the post to OSNZ Membership, PO Box 35150, Naenae, Lower Hutt 5041.

Local members (who receive the Otago newsletter only) should forward cheques for \$20 (Otago OSNZ) to Mary Thompson.

## **Notornis back numbers.**

Peter Schweigman and Mary Thompson have copies of Notornis from 1970s to 1990s, free to anyone who would like them.

