

Birds New Zealand

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Otago Region Newsletter 4/2015 April 2015



Crested Grebes on Lake Wanaka

Philip Munn's photo of a grebes nest on a pontoon (March 2015 newsletter) on the Wanaka marina is as good a place to start this story. Over the previous two years I had noticed a grebe close to the lake front and that sighting was as good an incentive to try and discover more about

this species in Lake Wanaka. A pair was located close to the shore in 2013 attempting to nest. It appears that the nest was damaged by a dog? A short article I wrote to the local paper asking for grebe sightings drew a number of responses, one of which pointed out that (Jenson & Snoyink) were about to undertake a follow-up census of this species they first carried out 10 years previously.

In that earlier survey they recorded 10 pairs on Wanaka (NZ 4th largest lake), but having seen them on the lake front from time to time I thought it worth the effort to try and find out how many there were on Wanaka, where they nested and likely breeding success, hence my letter to the local media in 2013. That small initial study expanded to look at difference's in numbers and chick survival rates on three lakes, Wanaka, Hayes and Dunstan, but mostly to find a locality where there were more than a single pair of grebes and spend time simply watching what they did when and why. Extensive kayaking of all three lakes confirmed that Lake Hayes was the locality of choice with a count of 70 adults and 41 chicks in late December 2013. As a follow-up to the by George Chance study in 1996-97 Hayes has been kayaked and Grebes counted every month since November 2013.

But above all, it seemed crazy not to try and doing something about the grebes that consistently failed to breed in Roys Bay. By the end of March 2015 31 chicks have fledged from the Marina bringing a great deal of personal satisfaction, not only in the result, but clearly the enjoyment to many hundreds of visitors and locals who have followed their progress. Grebes have rated highly in the "to do" stakes this summer.

I became aware of the first nest of this pair being on the Wanaka lake shore close to the marina in September 2013. As lake levels dropped it became exposed and failed, a second clutch onshore received a similar fate. The third nest was built on a pontoon on the marina and four eggs had been laid by early December. That's Philips photo. I received permission and access from the manager of the marina to track grebe activities which in turn led to me tracking down the owner of the boat and pontoon featured in Philips photo.

Both belong to Peter Marshall, a well-known Wanaka businessman who has become an enthusiastic and dedicated supporter of what was to



1) Shore nesting bird

away from the boat stern and this worked well. Thus eggs were rarely exposed for more than 10 minutes and as the birds became habituated to my presence they were often back on the nest within a minute or so. Of the seven eggs laid in two clutches, four chicks were fledged.



2) Bird incubating pontoon nest (nest 7)

spring and secondly, would the presence of a pair of birds in the vicinity of the marina (acting as decoys/social facilitators)) possibly attract other birds to breed in this area?

become a much larger project than originally anticipated. Clearly, the nest was as much under threat on the marina as it had been on the shoreline with the nest being just a few centimetres from the stern of a powerful motorboat.

The first attempt to move the nest to allow the boat to be launched failed and at this stage, with the full support of Peter I took over “managing” the nest. I moved the nest a few cm at a time over days

The second stage of the challenge fell into two parts. Firstly, could we keep the grebes over winter and secondly, could I get them to adopt substitute nest sites by creating floating platforms. The reason for trying to keep them over winter was twofold. Firstly to try and have the same pair breeding the following

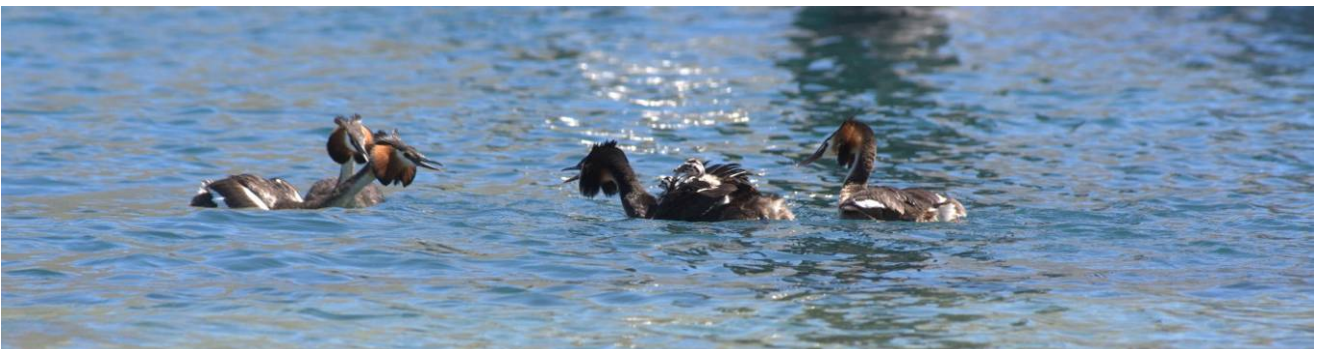
The approach to keeping them here was firstly to rebuild their nest on the pontoon whenever it was damaged, but not only rebuild it, but to build it

bigger and better (the supernormal stimuli theory) than they would normally do. The “super nests” I created worked amazingly well, even more so when I noticed courtship behaviour on the 9th June 2014 with the birds laying the first of three eggs in the pontoon nest on June 21st, (a new record) and going on to raise another two chicks.



3) *The first two chicks off “Petes pontoon” nest*

Secondly, based on observations of Grebes at Lake Hayes it became apparent that though territorial, grebes are social birds and they appear, when not breeding, to be quite happy in each other’s company. That observation suggested a degree of latitude existed in spacing platforms on the marina, a presumption in retrospect that was not well founded as territorial disputes frequently broke out between neighbouring birds over the following months.



4) *Note the chick on the back of the defending adult*

There will always be doubt in my mind that the hypothesis that “grebes like company” and that the pontoon birds (later known as nest 7) played a major role in what was to follow, but from September onwards a further 6 pairs of grebes, possibly seven were seen prospecting for nest sites around the marina. Some nested on the shore and one pair went as far as nesting on the stern step of a powerboat moored to the marina. What this behaviour clearly indicated among other things was an acute shortage of suitable habitat.

It became evident that the best approach to managing the species through to successful breeding was to instigate a management strategy that anticipated poor nest site decisions and take the initiative at the outset to find safe and suitable nest sites; that were as free as possible from the vagaries of lake level fluctuations, gross human disturbance and predation.



5) The Roys Bay marina provides berths for 84 boats

Nesting platforms attached to the floating marina looked to be the best option. Platforms would rise and fall in tune with changing lake levels, the marina is isolated from land, thus predation to a certain extent was controlled and finally, because access was limited to key holders the potential for vandalism was reduced. But to do that I needed not only the support of the Marina Board, but also had to request permission from all owners of boats that were berthed at piers I wanted to tether platforms to. In addition, there was an application to DoC for a permit to work with these birds. All approvals were gained with huge support from all agencies and individuals.



6) The first nest to be tethered to the marina was put in late in the evening of October 9th.

The use of floating platforms to assist grebes and other freshwater birds to breed successfully is not a novel concept, however, the use and design of platforms in the environment being used was. There were 42 boats tethered to the sheltered side of the marina and they would be moving freely throughout the summer in addition to tour boat activities, stand-up-paddlers, kayakers etc.

The first platform was made using damaged plywood and flotation using broken noodles from the Wanaka swimming pool and was launched on the evening of October 9th just after 9pm. (The timing reflected the fact that I did not want to be embarrassed being seen towing a platform with a kayak complete with homemade nest and lurking around the marina). At 7am the following morning I was delighted to see a pair of grebes furiously improving on my nest. This pair (nest 2) were the first of the new birds to fledge chicks (3) and when last seen were heading west past the yacht club to Stevenson's Arm. Over the coming months they would return to the marina with their chicks to dispute ownership of nest site 2 which was taken over by another pair of birds shortly after they vacated it.

Not all nesting attempts were successful and the trials and tribulations of training grebes to behave responsibly took a great deal of patience and time and will be discussed in the next newsletter. (If I am allowed!)

John Darby

Three go mad in Hokkaido (by one of them)

After a week being occupied with EAAFP meetings and with the agreed text of the meeting having been adopted Richard, David and I headed back to the hotel to change from suits, shirts and ties into polypros, gloves and heavy jackets. After a short conversation with the desk translating we headed off to the rental car firm in a taxi. The very polite young lady at the desk agreed that we had a booking and filled out our details and then took me back to the car and made me walk around it confirming it had no scratches. There was snow all around the ground but the day was fine and clear as we fired up the English speaking GPS and headed out of Kushiro the main city in Eastern Hokkaido. The first half hour in a new rental is always the most interesting and today was no exception as there was banks of snow everywhere. Even more interesting was the placement of traffic lights in Japan which are on the far side of the intersection; fun if the curb is hidden under a snow bank. However they do drive on the same side of the road: unlike Alaska.

We were booked into the well-known Furen Lodge and had about three hours to get there before dark. The drive along the main roads was easy with the road signs and GPS all giving directions in English. The amount of snow present in the country was impressive and clearly deep drifts and a large amount of completed work by snow ploughs and other technology. Before arriving at Furen lodge we took the time to find some birds and were rewarded with pygmy woodpecker, great spotted woodpecker, Eurasian Jay, Eurasian Nuthatch and tree sparrow. A bit further along some open water amongst the ice had whooper swan, common goldeneye common merganser or smew, Black kite and the very impressive Stellers Sea Eagle. In the dusk we arrived at Furen Lodge and were warmly welcome by Take San and his very friendly wife. Dinner was traditional Japanese cuisine with lots of fish accompanied with conversation about the birds we had seen so far in our time in Japan, what the weather would bring over the next few days and where we should head and what to look for. The weather forecast was not promising with a decaying depression from the Pacific Ocean travelling north east along the Northern Japanese coast and looking to centre itself over where we intended to be in a couple of days.

The next morning was clear and cold. Breakfast in the lodge was accompanied with watching birds on the feeders outside the house. Great spotted woodpeckers, marsh tit, willow tit, Japanese tit, nuthatch's hawfinchs, bulbul and tree sparrows were all taking advantage of the food available. We left and headed north to the last town Rausu. Our first stop was at Notsuke which is a large gravel peninsula poking out into the sea made up of sea washed gravel. Viewing from along the gravel bank revealed a large number of water fowl offshore whooper swan, mallard, harlequin duck, common goldeneye, white-winged scoter, black scoter, long-tailed duck, common merganser (also known as goosander), red-breasted merganser, Eurasian coot, glaucous gull, slaty-backed gull large-billed crow and tree sparrow were all common.



Driving along the road a short-eared owl was spotted. At the end of the peninsula, pelagic cormorant, spectacled guillemot and the massive and unmistakable Stellar's sea-eagle, were seen. Across the water a massive volcano rose up from the sea into

the cloud. This was the first clear view of Russia which closely abuts the North-eastern coast of Japan.

We carried on North stopping where we could. The bird lists were dominated by seaducks and gulls. By the early evening we had arrived at the lodge where we were to stay and hopefully see the Blakiston sea eagles. The lodge was a small bed and breakfast with traditional futons on the floor to sleep on. Our host was a happy friendly middle-aged woman with no English. But that did not stop her making a full very traditional evening meal with lots of local fish dishes and pickled vegetables. After dinner we sat in the dining room and looked out across the creek, or more accurately at the snow bank that covered the creek which had a small hole dug in it. Two floodlights showed the snow falling as the evening went on

and then a large dark bird arrived and sat in the tree. It was the fish eagle.



The bird jumped down off the tree and looked into the dug out part of the creek. It then leapt into this and re-appeared with a small fish, which it ate. It then flew off and was soon replaced by another individual (distinguishable by different band colours). The birds would call some time but mostly would just arrive silently grab a fish and go and sit on an adjacent power pole and consume it. The birds were large, but what was so disconcerting was that when they opened their wings to take off it appeared that most of the bulk was the wings and that the body itself appeared quite small. The wings as well and being long (1.7-1.9 m wingspan) were extremely broad. The two adult

continued to fish for some time. The female eating for herself and the male taking fish to a juvenile which sat on the power pole and called for food. The whole scene was lit up by floodlights which showed the continuous snow off to great effect. After about an hour of continuous observations we retired and left them to it.

The next morning the snow had eased a bit but the car was covered in about 15 cm of snow. A grader dug out the small road where we were staying and after breakfast we paid up (cash please no credit cards accepted) and headed off south again. The snow started again and it carried on snowing for the rest of the day. The squalls were spectacular with complete white outs occurring occasionally. At other time's we were driving from lamppost to lamppost as the total white out blotted out everything around us. In spite of the intensity of the weather the roads were kept open by snow plough. By mid-day we had got back to Nemuro the most significant town in the area. Richard decided to work while David and I went for a walk. The town was deserted the snow was thick and dry. The next day the weather started to clear and we headed out to



first a town called Hanasakiminato. The roads were passable with care but we had a fun few hours working our way around the Port looking at birds on the water. We were able to see Harlequin Duck, Black Scoter, Long-tailed Duck, Common Merganser,

Red-breasted Merganser, Great Crested Grebe, Pelagic Cormorant, Black Kite, White-tailed Eagle, Slaty-backed Gull and Large-billed Crow. We then set off south-east to Ochiishi Beach where many of the same species were seen with the addition of Northern Shovellor. In the afternoon we headed out to the end of the Peninsula and spent a cold couple of hours looking out into the straights between Japan and Russia watching a collection of sea duck, mergansers, gull and cormorants passing backwards and forwards in front of us. We added ancient murrelet to our list. On our way back to Furen Lodge we spotted a large flock of whooper swan on an inlet and there in amongst them were two red-crowned cranes.



The next morning the wind was up a bit so our planned boat trip out to sea was delayed. So we headed back to Cape Noppasu. Again lots of action with mergansers, scoters, cormorant and gulls all present. New additions to our list were red throated

loon, red-necked grebe, common murre and thick-billed murre. By the middle of the day the wind had dropped and we assembled at Habomai and

set off. It appeared that we were heading straight for the Russian Islands which lie about 3km off the Japanese coast until we reached a line and the skipper turned abruptly and headed back towards Japan. The wind had dropped and so there was not as much action but there were still good numbers of cormorants, murrees and gulls. After getting back to Habomai we headed back towards Kushiro and dropped Richard off at the airport before heading for a hotel. The next morning we had a half day of local bird watching before dropping the rental off. We worked our way along the foreshore seeing more of the same species but having to work a bit harder to confirm the id's. After lunch we found the rail station, changed out of cold weather gear and settled back as we travelled at express speed across Hakkaido to Tomakomai. Here we caught the overnight ferry south. It was dark as we left port but the next morning we were up on the after deck before breakfast being very hopeful, but were only rewarded with one ancient murrelet for our troubles as well as a collection of slaty-backed gulls, black tailed gull and glaucous winged gulls. Off the ferry and into a taxi to the Shinkansen train station. Then a very quick ride to Tokyo. Its very deceiving. David said that he felt that the train was "going slow only about 150 km" ...so I got my GPS out and clocked us at 305 kmh. It was ok to take photos so long as you looked at least 500 meters out form the train; anything close was a bit blurry. Once in Tokyo we had enough time to get to the airport and head back to a New Zealand summer.

Northern Japan was extremely cold in January. Although at about the same latitude as Timaru the winter climate is not the same at all. The snow was deep and extremely dry unlike the stuff we get here. The trains are on time all the time and so smooth. The people are polite to a point of frustration. Everything works including an exciting range of birds which are all different.

Thanks to David and Richard for a great time.

Bruce McKinlay

Tomahawk Times



Sticky Loop

A silvereye lay unmoving like a toy on an outside window ledge, on the last warm day of March near Tomahawk Lagoon.

The silvereye looked like it had just died there, unseen by five cats which prowl the area. When picked up, the bird still had a pulse but lay still and barely moved an eye. An object like a metal washer was attached to its belly. The metal was carefully peeled off, and the bird placed in a box, as it had barely revived. The metal was an alloy eyelet from a tarpaulin or trailer cover, still with sticky adhesive in a full circle groove. It weighed only a few grams, but enough to exhaust a silvereye glued to it.

The silvereye started moving about slowly in the box, so it was checked, perhaps it might like a sweet drink before release. As soon as the smallest gap opened, the silvereye hurtled out with a shrill call, and instead of flying out the nearby open door, it went up the hall and into a back room. That room is an archaeological site of partial projects, boxes of books, tools, and camping and fishing gear. The bird vanished. So the door was closed, and curtains shut to prevent it flying into windows, and after a quick search it was found. It was on a surfcasting rod, grasping the reel bail arm and pretending to be invisible. It was now a strong bird again, and unwilling to let go of the reel, so with one hand loosely over the bird and the other holding the rod it was all carried out into the garden. After being placed near shrubs where other silvereyes were foraging and calling, the lucky bird immediately flew off to join them.

So far the cold front for April has not brought any new birds to Tomahawk Lagoon. Previously, similar Autumn weather brought a coot and a scaup on the same day, and a spotless crane. These were solitary visitors for only a day, although spotless crane may be more frequent but unseen.

A lone kingfisher is still around upper Tomahawk Lagoon, although from calls heard there seem to be two birds. After failing to find nests last spring, an ideal site has been seen, but is on private land so has not been checked. A kingfisher is also seen, less frequently, at the outlet creek of lower Tomahawk Lagoon and flying along the edge of the sports field, but it is unknown whether it is one of the other birds seen. House sparrows foraging around the sports field and suburban gardens include a completely white sparrow, which has avoided predation despite being too obvious, and seems to be fully accepted by the flock of brown sparrows. Maybe being with numerous active, alert companions gives it more safety. It was suggested the bird may be a canary, but it looks like a white sparrow through binoculars and is always with a flock of house sparrows.

Andrew Austin



A few of several thousand Red-billed Gulls and White-fronted Terns at Aramoana Mole on 7 April.

Notices and Business

Sinclair Wetlands Trial Survey: Sunday April 26.



Acoustic recorder placed overlooking main pond at Sinclair Wetlands, Dec 2014.

A field trip is planned to Sinclair Wetlands to do a trial survey to test out the methods for surveying and counting the waterbirds, bush birds and fernbirds before starting the actual seasonal survey. It will be on Sunday morning, 26th April, carpooling from Dunedin leaving at 10.00 am. If you are interested please contact Mary Thompson 464 0787 maryt@actrix.co.nz for more information and to organize car-pooling. We will have our lunch out there too. We will walk out to Ram Island for a vantage point to view lagoons and to look and listen for bush birds doing 5 minute bird counts on a circuit around the island, then come back via the reed beds and use playback recordings of fernbird calls. The Sinclair Wetlands Trust is very pleased that we are supporting their conservation work by doing this survey for them. If the weather is unsuitable on the Sunday the field trip will be postponed to Monday 27th April (ANZAC holiday); phone Mary on Sunday morning between 8 and 9 am if uncertain or to check for cancellations.

Global Big Day on eBird: Saturday May 9th

Teams from Cornell Lab of Ornithology are hoping to tally 4,000 bird species in a single day by having birders from all around the world going out on May 9 to look for birds and entering them on eBird; so why not join them and spend some time on May 9 looking for our own NZ birds to add to the list.

NZ Bird Conference & AGM, Blenheim, Saturday 30 May to Monday 1 June 2015 “The People and the Birds”

This will be a special conference as it is celebrating the 75th anniversary of the founding of OSNZ. This conference will not only look at our unique birds, but also at the people, projects, activities and history of the Society and its members, and then take a peek at our future direction. There will be field trips on the Monday. This should be a fantastic weekend to mark this historical occasion! And as it is being held in Blenheim it makes it easier to get to. Several of us will be attending so others should plan to attend too. Registration is Online at the Birds NZ website.

Birds New Zealand (OSNZ) Subscriptions 2015

A reminder that the annual membership subscriptions were due 1 January 2015. This is all too easy to overlook this during the Christmas New Year period. There are 18 of us who haven't paid yet. You can renew subs online. I'm afraid the Grace period will expire soon. Thanks. Mary Thompson, Regional Representative.

Programme 2015

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 April 22 | Janet Ledingham
Birds of Shetland and the Farne Islands |
| Sunday April 26 | NEW DATE
Field trip to Sinclair Wetlands
Car-pooling from Dunedin at 10 am. We will survey waterfowl, bush birds and fernbirds.
Contact Mary Thompson 464 0787,
maryt@actrix.co.nz |
| Wed May 27 | Neil Roberston
Birds of Ecuador |
| Wed June 24 | Wray Grimaldi
Disease in Adelie Penguins |
| Sunday June 28 | Winter Wader Count, High tide at 12.15 pm at 1.9 m. We are keen for more people to be involved, so please contact Peter Schweigman peter.schweigman@xtra.co.nz |
| Wed July 23 | Hamish Spencer Classification of the
World's Cormorants and Shags |
| Wed Aug 26 | Kelvin Lloyd
Update on the Beyond Orokonui project. |
| Wed Sept 23 | Catriona MacLeod and Priscilla Wehi
“Birds as measures of biodiversity.” |

Newsletter editor: Derek Onley, derekonley@yahoo.com

Many thanks to all who contributed.

Final date for contributions to next newsletter: May 20.