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OF NEW ZEALAND
(INCORPORATED)

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Otago Region Newsletter 3/2009 March 2009

**The George Chance Memorial Census
of Great Crested Grebes in Central Otago, February 2009**

A personal view by Mary Thompson

I am pleased to report that our census of Great Crested grebes was successfully carried out on the weekend of 21/22 February. It turned out to be a very exciting birding weekend for everyone involved. A huge thank you goes to Peter Schweigman whose organisational skills, persistence, enthusiasm and encouragement saw this project through all its planning stages to its fulfilment. OSNZ members in Queenstown and Wanaka – Dawn Palmer, Barry Lawrence and Florence Gaud – provided invaluable help in seeking out suitable boat transport for the lakes and



making contact with DOC and Wakatipu Coastguard. People from Clutha Fisheries Trust also offered help for Lake Dunstan. Thanks to all those who offered their assistance.

Everything had come together well, but as it turned out the weekend of the census coincided with the unprecedented huge Low that had descended on NZ tracking all the way from New Guinea and parking itself over the South Island for several days, accompanied by five fronts and gusty winds from all directions. Nevertheless the Otago team assembled on the Friday night in Cromwell and Louise and Neil at Queenstown. The decision was made as a consequence of the weather to cancel the use of all motorboats, but rain and wind didn't stop the car-based crews going ahead with the census and we started on Saturday on time.

Lake Dunstan was covered by two teams, Peter and Susan on the east side and Mary and Alan Baker on the west side. The lake was calm and the light actually almost perfect for bird spotting despite the intermittent rain. We found that access was possible to most of the shoreline so we probably saw most of the birds on the lake.

Lake Hayes, known for its high population of grebes in Central Otago, was tackled by Sue Galloway and Karen Reiner in a Canadian canoe. Without these two it would not have been possible to have carried out such a complete survey. The conditions on the lake were calm at the north end where many family groups (many with 2 young) were seen, but the south end was very windy forcing the paddlers close to the raupo where many grebes were also sheltering. The strong head wind back past the showgrounds proved a good workout! Most of the birds seemed to be close to the edges so probably not too many were missed in the count. Lesley, Lala and Verity honed their grebe identification skills by walking the south-east section of Lake Hayes; their count taken before the wind got up confirmed the numbers seen by the paddlers in that area. Pairs were also seen courtship displaying.



The intrepid team of Lesley, Lala and Verity also walked to Lake Dispute, and as they said there was no dispute about the lack of grebes there. Louise and Neil managed a successful count of Queenstown with Wayne Perkins aboard The Million Dollar View excursion and checked out Moke Lake.

Dave and Janet York were disappointed not to see any grebes from the coffee shop in Arrowtown, so they headed down the south arm of Wakatipu and saw 2 grebes near Kingston (a first report).

We eventually arrived back at our Cromwell accommodation on the Saturday night damp, muddy, tired and spent a happy evening recounting the day's activities and comparing who saw what, where and when. Peter had the log burner roaring (in the middle of summer!) and thanks to Sue G. for putting together a great meal.

Sunday dawned calm and fair and two cars went home via the Waitaki Valley and managed a good coverage of the lakes, seeing hundreds of scaup, coot, two black stilts and topping off the day with wonderful views of a pair of grebes, one carrying two stripy young on its back and the other diving for fish to feed them.

Results

The most exciting finding is that the number of Great Crested Grebes on the Otago Lakes has nearly doubled in the five years since the last count, from 117 to 219 now. And this is likely to be an under-estimate due to the inclement weather, the partial coverage of some lakes and the non-coverage of Mt Nicholas Lagoon.

Lake	Adults	Juvenile	Total	2004 Total ⁴
OTAGO				
Butchers Dam	0	0	0	1
Hawea ¹	3	0	3	0
Wanaka ¹	12	6	18	4
Wakatipu (Frankton/Q'town) ¹	5	4	9	4
Wakatipu (Kingston) ¹	2	0	2	nc
Mt Nicholas Lagoon	nc	nc	nc	11
Dunstan	52	38	90	16
Dispute	0	0	0	0
Moke	3	2	5	0
Kirkpatrick	0	0	0	0
Johnson	9	2	11	6
Hayes ²	66	15	81	75
Otago Totals	152	67	219	117
WAITAKI				
Benmore	46	6	52	22
Aviemore	12	12	24	5
Waitaki ³	7	2	9	0
Waitaki Totals	65	20	85	27

The greatest success story was for Lake Dunstan where there are over 5 times more birds, with an increase from just 16 in 2004 to 90. Breeding pairs and juveniles were seen around the whole lake and for the first time 7 adults and 5 juveniles were spotted on the lake arm between Clyde Dam and Cromwell township, an area where they have never been seen before. The greatest concentration of Great Crested Grebes was at the head of the lake where the Clutha enters through a braided wetland and much willow cover. The high ratio of juveniles to adults suggests that the birds are breeding very successfully on Lake Dunstan.

Lake Hayes has maintained its high numbers (81), including many breeding pairs, but did not show any great change from 2004 numbers (75), which may indicate that the population on this small lake is now nearing a maximum. The ratio of juveniles to adults also indicated that their breeding here is successful.

Breeding pairs were seen at Queenstown Bay and also in Frankton Arm. Although no birds were found at Moke Lake on census day, a pair and 2 young were seen there a week later so have been included.

Another success story was the trebling of numbers on the Waitaki hydro-lakes, with a doubling of the numbers on Benmore, the first sightings of breeding pairs on Aviemore and the first report of birds on Waitaki. The number of juveniles was four times the 2004 figure.



Mary Thompson and Peter Schweigman.

The Coastal Otago Godwits in the summer of 2008/09

Numbers have been steady in Otago, but it is understood that the global number has dropped, due mainly to the destruction of their refuel stations in Asia.

They are on the move. The staggering 1154 godwits counted at Hooper's Inlet on 4 March was reduced to a meagre 155 by 13 March plus an estimated 300 more at Aramoana, a hundred or so of which appeared to move off seawards. (The 1154 at Hooper's probably included the Aramoana godwits, for on the following day about 100 turned up at Aramoana only to disappear Peninsula-ward after 5 minutes.) At Blueskin Bay the highest count was over 700 but there were approximately 150 left by March 15 and apparently none two days later.

Checking flags and bands on godwits can be a time consuming exercise. And unsuccessful if the birds are not cooperating. They might be too far away, roosting in a very tight bunch, standing on one leg, legs submerged or a harrier might turn up and disturbs the flock. Despite the problem with seeing the legs properly, we still saw a number of flagged and banded birds. In the period October to March a total of 18 godwits banded at Warrington Beach in February 2006 were spotted. Of the 9 banded at Warrington in January 2009, four turned up at Aramoana. From Awarua Bay, Southland, we saw four that had been banded there in October 2004 and one, banded on 11 January 2009 seen just 4 days later at Aramoana. A bird banded in Christchurch 5 years ago also turned up at Aramoana.



While checking these godwits, it was a delight to see their aerial display, a grand ballet of flight. We'll have to do this again next year. **Peter Schweigman**

Buff weka Project

Background: - A co management project to reintroduce Buff weka to Otago was initiated between Ngai Tahu Runanga in Otago and the Department of Conservation in the 1990's.

30 Buff weka were sourced from the Chatham Islands in 2001 and were initially placed in an Aviary on Te Peka Karara or Stephenson's Island in Lake Wanaka. After some teething problems with weka swimming off the island the population settled down to essentially comprise four pairs of birds which would generally produce around 22 chicks per season.

The initial plan sought to establish a large population of buff weka on a mainland site where weka could establish in large enough numbers to not need intensive management. After some analysis the best site for attempting this part of the project was determined to be the Stephenson's Peninsula, Lake Wanaka, which is about 3000 ha.

The idea of establishing a large independent population on the Peninsula presented a number of issues which needed to be addressed before proceeding. A priority for the farmer was to reduce possum numbers present to eliminate the bovine Tb risk that he has faced. This required two ground based cyanide operations. Meanwhile the weka on Te Peka Karara continued to produce chicks who needed homes.

Consequently weka were released on Mou Waho in Lake Wanaka and Pigeon Island in Lake Wakatipu.

In winter 2008 the possum status of the Peninsula was at a low enough level that we could start to plan a translocation for autumn 2009.

The newsletter below by Flo Gaud is an update from December on this work as the translocation comes closer.

Bruce McKinlay

Buff Weka News Letter

Due to a death in one of our most prolific females, two new breeding pairs have been caught from Mou Waho (Lake Wanaka) and Wawahi-Waka (Pigeon Island, Lake Wakatipu) and transferred to the aviary on Te Peka Karara for a soft release. After a few weeks in captivity, both pairs were banded and transmitters fitted on the females before release.

Monitoring following release indicates that the Mou Waho pair has established a territory around the aviary and are expecting 3 eggs to hatch in the next few days. The Wawahi-Waka pair has established a territory at Main Bay on the South end of Te Peka Karara and has started nesting with a nest of two eggs at the moment.

Four juveniles are in the aviary and more new chicks are expected very soon. The lone male from the Aviary breeding pair had to be transferred to Mou Waho as he was disturbing other breeding pairs on the island looking for a partner. Less than 10

days after the transfer he swam back to Te Peka Karara. This journey includes a swim of 900m across part of Lake Wanaka. He was caught again and put in the aviary before being transferred with the lone male from Main Bay to Wawahi-Waka.

Our resident summer ranger Sandra Soeder-Hunua started in late October and she is managing the breeding population and monitoring the juveniles in the aviary. Volunteers are involved in the weka project and will cover Sandra's days off.

DOC and Ngai Tahu have been working together regarding the translocation of the weka on the Peninsula and Ngai Tahu is writing a translocation proposal. As part of the design of this translocation proposal is to have as many birds available for translocation at one time as possible, an extension has been added to the aviary on Te Peka Karara to hold more juveniles.

Regular servicing of the stoat traps is continuing on the Wanaka islands. In the November check no predators were caught on Te Peka Karara, and Mou Waho. Regular sightings of weka with chicks on Mou Waho indicate the population is healthy and increasing.

A key aspect of introducing weka to the Peninsula is to reduce predator numbers to low levels. To achieve this predator control monitoring on the Peninsula is carried out every 4 weeks. During October and November, 2 stoats, 13 rats, 5 weasels and 2 hedgehogs were caught.

During our last visit to Lake Wakatipu in December, no predators were caught on Wawahi-Waka and Matau Islands.

A lot of weka with chicks were observed around the islands which indicates a healthy and increasing population. We are still looking at catching another breeding pair of weka for Te Peka Karara. And if we can catch any independent juveniles these will be used to increase the number of juveniles for the translocation project to Stevenson's Peninsula.

Florence Gaud

Ornithological Snippets

Doreen Grant reports 2 more **Kingfishers** in Outram and Steve Lawrence had good views of 3 **Brown Creeper** in his backyard there on 4 March, possibly 2 adults and one juvenile.

Also on 25 January he saw an adult male **Falcon** at Loganburn reservoir off Dunstan track perched on rocky outcrop at northern end, kekking at a fisherman. Other **Falcons** were seen by Bob & Francesca Cunninghame and Brent Barrat around Hummock Station east of Waikouaiti on 7 March. Peter Schweigman saw a juvenile sitting quietly on a stump only 10 meters away at Gabriel's Gully on 22 February and Alan Baker reported 1 at Lake Middleton on 24 February and yet another at Hampden on 1 March. A single bird was seen on the cliff face at the Kawarau Gorge, opposite the bungee jumping bridge in late February and a juvenile was having a go at about 150 **Greenfinches** feeding along the tideline at Warrington Spit on 14 March.

Mary Thompson and Sue Galloway saw 2 **Marsh Crakes** at close quarters in bright sunshine at the edge of the raupo on the north-west side of Lake Waihola and

watched them for about 20 minutes preening and feeding on Saturday 24 January, which was that gloriously hot calm day - remember?

Dave York has seen an **Australasian Little Grebe** again at the Levels gravel pit north of Timaru at the end of January; this is where he found them nesting over 10 years ago and George Chance photographed them there.

On 22 February Peter Schweigman checked Gabriel's Gully for **Coots** and **Scaup**, a follow up from a visit on 6 January 2006 when these species were first recorded. They are still there, nicely tucked away at the end of the gully.

Alan Baker saw a **Black Stilt** and a mostly black hybrid at Omarama oxidation ponds from 23-26 February and a Black and one hybrid on a pond near Lake Ohau on 24 February. He also reported 12 **Caspian Terns** at the Ohau River mouth on 24 February and there were 22, a high number, at Blueskin Bay on 14 March. Almost 5000 **Black-billed Gulls**, over 1 in 20 of the world population, were roosting on the sandbar near the wharf at Karitane in late February - early March.



And for those who haven't seen heaps of them in Australia, Michael Szabo reports that the errant **Straw-necked Ibis** that arrived in Central in late February was still present near the Wanaka-Tarras road on 10 March (about 600m along Bellevue Road, on the right about 300m away) - along with four **endemic, endangered Black-fronted Terns** working the marshy areas in the same large field.

Notices and Business

Colour Banded Bellbirds and Tui

Murray Efford is colour banding Bellbirds and Tui in Wakari and would be interested to hear of any sightings. The left leg has a colour over metal band and the right leg two colours. The colours are dark blue and green (not always easy to distinguish), orange and red (can be awkward until you have seen a couple) and an easy yellow. He may add white when he can get some. Murray's phone is 03 4764668

Mt Watkin

Does anyone know anything about the birds of the Mt Watkin forest "right down into the river?" Mt Watkin is inland from Waikouaiti.

Jill Hamel is on an advisory committee to the Otago Conservation Board who are putting a submission together re its management plan and would like more information.

AGM at Indoor Meeting 25 March

This is a chance for you to have your say about ideas for future projects and other OSNZ activities you would like to be involved in. Suggestions so far include surveys of Mt Watkin, Akatore coast and/or forest, Ross Creek Reservoir and a repeat of the Harbour count.

Suggestions for speakers and/or offers would be gratefully received.

Mary Thompson

Report on Indoor Meeting 25 February

There was a record large turnout of over 40 people for the first Indoor Meeting of the year, when Lisa Hegg talked to us about her study of Mohua. She delighted us with beautiful photographs and recordings of the various songs, chatter and buzz calls of the birds. She described her research using DNA from modern birds and 100 year old museum specimens to study the genetic diversity and structure of the surviving Mohua populations. Mohua are on the IUCN endangered list and Lisa's findings will inform the translocation strategies and suggest that 60 birds should be used in re-introductions. A film crew from Great Southern Television, which is filming a series called Birdland for TV1, were at the meeting, and we hope that some of Lisa's talk is included. The narrator for this series is Jeremy Wells of 'Eating Media Lunch' so we hope that his 'take' on our meeting may be positive if we do happen to feature!

Mary Thompson

New Regional Recorder

Just a reminder to send Alan, our new Regional Recorder a copy of your observations - mail to Alan Baker, 48 Pacific Street, Dunedin 9010.

We like to have them recorded in our monthly newsletter, so please also send the information to Derek Onley, Newsletter Editor - email derekonley@yahoo.com--

Email Newsletters are in glorious colour!

Many of you will have received a pdf copy of this Newsletter by email as well as mail. It is quite a big job to photocopy, collate, address and post the newsletters so if you are happy to receive the newsletter **only by email**, or if you would like to but do not, please send your email address with your request to:

mary.thompson@stonebow.otago.ac.nz

Programme 2009

Monthly Indoor Meetings will be held in the Benham Seminar Room, Benham Building, Department of Zoology, 340 Great King Street at 8 p.m.
Please be on time: the door will be locked after 8 p.m.

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| Wednesday 25 March | Indoor Meeting Bruce McKinlay
will introduce and guide us through eBird,
with some hands-on live action.
This will be followed by the AGM. |
| Sunday 19 April | Hawksbury Lagoon Autumn Survey. Start 1.00pm
Contact Derek Onley 482 2831 |
| Wednesday 22 April | Indoor Meeting Steve Lawrence
“Experiences with Falcons” |
| Wednesday 27 May | Indoor Meeting Dr Bruce Robertson
“The role of genetics in Kakapo recovery” |
| Saturday 27 June | Hawksbury Lagoon Winter Survey. |

Newsletter editor: Derek Onley, c/o Blueskin Store, Waitati, 9060
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Many thanks to all who contributed,
Final date for copy for next newsletter: 14 April