

The Wrybill

Newsletter of the Canterbury Region, Ornithological Society of New Zealand

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Droppings from the Regional Rep

By Jan Walker

RR is short for Regional Representative: it is not R and R which stands for Rest and Recreation. Sometimes the recreation bit is accurate, but the rest hardly ever is. I thought I'd point this out as I've heard folk calling it all sorts of things. And after this newsletter, Rambling and Rubbish come to mind, eh Ed? Not to mention Raving and Rant. (Never Jan, Ed)

I have been extraordinarily busy since September and before that. As I'm the Membership Secretary, Treasurer and Deliveries Coordinator for the Selwyn Electorate for the Green Party, as well as the Volunteer Coordinator for the Green Room open office in Bedford Row, you can imagine it was all go up to Election Day. Then we had the usual long wait for special votes from overseas etc. as these are always much in the Green Party's favour. Finally we were rewarded with a Christchurch MP again, number 9 on the list. The only problem is we are nowhere near being able to influence anything much any longer. But a lot of policy is worked out at Select Committees and Green MPs are good at committees since we pride ourselves on consensus decision-making! Let's hope it still works.

Well, now it's away with the birdies instead of the fairies. My most exciting events have been juvenile Bellbirds in the garden being fed by Mum and Dad. Probably not fledged near me, sadly, but travelled from higher up the hill, where they breed in numbers in Victoria Park and Kennedy's Bush Reserve. Andrew Crossland reports they probably breed in a number of places in the City now, like Bottle Lake, Shirley,

Botanic Gardens, and the base of Port Hills. I've also had families of Grey Warblers, Fantails, White-eyes, Redpolls and Kingfishers passing through or near-by. And a Harrier came early one morning and sat on top of a small maple next to the house trying to pick off baby Goldfinches. The tremendous kerfuffle this caused among the resident birds was deafening!

In September a fieldtrip went to Living Springs to practice 5 minute bird counts, listening closely for 5 minutes to count the number of individual birds within earshot and trying to identify them. We have been given several areas of bush on the Port hills to cover with regular counts, 3 times a year, as part of the Banks Peninsula Bushbird Survey for The BP Conservation Trust. Sheila and I have done a few areas in winter, again in spring and are about to start summer/autumn counts. If anyone would like to take on an area to do regularly, ideally in pairs, we can get you started.



Photo: Ann Sherlock
Sheila and Jan counting bush birds in the flowering kowhai

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A couple of well-attended trips were made to the Ashley River in November, one for the annual wader count (see p9) and one with the Rivercare Group Chairman to view nesting birds. This season the Ashley was one of the only rivers to hold successful breeding colonies of Black-billed Gulls and Black-fronted Terns due to ongoing flooding in the alpine-fed large rivers. Strenuous trapping by local stalwarts of the Rivercare group is a major contributor to the success of these few endangered birds. River surveys on the huge rivers have been on again, off again all season, but yielded good numbers of Wrybill in some stretches, only to have floods wipe out their nesting attempts again and again. But this is how this environment has always been, for thousands of years. The excess water clears the shingle of weeds and forms islands suitable for breeding. What is not usual is the constant abstraction of water and lowering of river flows by modern irrigation for farming, so that islands become joined to mainland and access for predators is reinstated together with weed growth and disappearance of invertebrates in the dried-up channels.

What value can Central Plains Water put on stopping the extinction of an endangered bird species? Like some Waiouru Medal from the WW1, isn't a species a National Treasure? An invaluable 'icon', a priceless heritage? And not just a National Treasure, species are International Heirlooms. It is we who have their stewardship in our care for future world populations. But that isn't how Multinational Companies and giant corporations look at the world. It's time they did.

Godwit banding has been on again at the estuary in Christchurch, (see pp6-7). The second session was unsuccessful when the birds proved a bit uncooperative and again when the rope broke leaving the projectile winging its way into the shipping-lane. (Actually, it went all of 50ms onto the sand). All our helpers were really patient and cooperative and hopefully enjoyed the ordeal! Many thanks go to Rob Schuckard, David Melville and Ingrid Hutzler [OSNZEO] for coming to conduct these events.

We are moving to a new place for evening meetings after several years at Spreydon Bowling Club. The Mahaanui Area DOC office

at 31 Nga Mahi Drive has a very warm, well-appointed meeting room which the staff have kindly offered us for the last Monday of each meeting month (no meetings December or January). It also has all the equipment for showing powerpoint presentations, CDs, DVDs and Videos, slides, tapes, tupperware parties etc etc. So come and see for yourself. Tea and coffee facilities, hot chocolate too. Thanks to the Doc staff and Bev Alexander for finding this wonderful venue.

I have the Branch Library in boxes at home now. Marj is renting her house, so until we find a more permanent way to display the books at meetings, I'll bring some along in boxes each meeting. Branch pictures held by people are not yours for ever, I'm afraid. Please bring them along to members night in February so others can have the chance to display them at home for a while.

Local Members' News

Congratulations to Paul and Kristen on the birth of Matilda Scofield on 10 November.



Photo: Janine

President's Resignation

Statement from Richard Holdaway:

"At the conclusion of the OSNZ Council meeting held in Christchurch on 18 October, and with considerable regret, I tendered my resignation as President of OSNZ. Council accepted my resignation and requested that I continue as an ex officio member of Council until the next AGM. My decision to resign was based on the level of commitments in my professional life that are much greater now than when I accepted the position of President in 2006. I am now responsible for three major research programmes. The probability of frequent overseas absences with respect to those programmes, and the arrival of the first grandchild earlier this year and the wish to enjoy more family life than has been possible recently, means I will not be able to contribute to OSNZ at the level I see as necessary from the President. I would have preferred to have completed the term; circumstances have ruled otherwise. David Lawrie, as Vice President, has become Acting President until the AGM. I am sure that he and Council will continue to move OSNZ forward. Thank you all for your assistance over the past couple of years."

Statement from the Acting President, David Lawrie:

"The Council in accepting Richard's resignation noted the circumstances and acknowledged the strain that the Society's functions had placed on him and his family. The Council also noted Richard's desire to concentrate on fulfilling his responsibilities as Editor of Notornis, in ensuring that the changeover to Jim Biskie is completed as soon as possible, and that the outstanding issues be posted within the next 3 months. The Council also accepted Richard's suggestion that once the Editorship handover is completed he take responsibility for developing the new "Projects and Activities Committee " to assist Council in achieving the outstanding goals of the strategic plan adopted 3 years ago. If any member would like to be involved in organising these activities, which were considered a high priority in the recent member survey, please contact Ingrid directly or through your Regional Representative."

Recent Sightings

Late September 2008 Andrew Crossland confirmed what he has suspected for the past two seasons, that one pair of Little Black Cormorants in breeding plumage, with white plumes on their ear coverts and "eyebrows", were nesting at the Bromley Oxidation Ponds amongst a colony of Pied, Black and Little Cormorants. At Ellesmere north shore, Colin Hill and Steve Wratten found 2 hybrid black stilts and one banded pure black male, left leg green over black; right leg green over yellow.

In October an Australian Bittern was seen at Cooper's Lagoon by Russell Cannings. Sightings of the first Shining Cuckoos of the year were reported by Sheila and Jan on 16th October at Travis Wetland, on the 18th by Jan, Bev, Janet and Ruth, who heard a bird calling in the Garden of Tane and by Eric Forsyth who saw

and heard one Shining Cuckoo at Okuti Reserve, Little River on the same day. On 26th October Bev Alexander reported a White Heron on the tail race at the back of Lake Coleridge Power Station and 4 Crested Grebe on Lake Lyndon. Bev and Jan saw 4 Cattle Egret in breeding plumage on Tulls Road, Rangiora on 27th October. Bev's last sighting was of 2 birds on November 2. On October 25 Frances Schmechel reported Wrybill nesting on the Waiiau River (4 pairs and 1 individual), the first time in several decades that wrybill had been recorded on this river according to her sources. Two colonies of black-billed gulls with several hundred birds each were also found on the river.

People participating in the November 8 Field Trip were treated to the sight of a Bittern which stood immobile, bill pointed skyward, then slowly crossed the gravel road leading to the Ashley River mouth. On November 11 Jan

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found 4 Whimbrel, two with obvious white rumps, on the spit between Ashworths beach and the mouth of the Ashley. At the end of the month Colin and Steve reported 20 Red Knot on the Yarrs to Jarvis section of Lake Ellesmere, the highest number they can remember there.

In December Jan observed in her garden a female blackbird sitting on 4 eggs which was regularly being fed by her mate. Also, a kingfisher, with possibly three young, "vigorously tenderising a white eye against a branch before delivering it to the nest." Nick Allen reported 3 Eastern Curlews and 3 Whimbrels (at least one hudsonicus) on December 20 on the north side of the Ashley River mouth. On December 24 Steve Ratten saw a Black-fronted Dotterel at Yarr's pool on the side furthest from the lake edge. These birds are an occasional visitor to the lake in winter but a summer recording is very unusual.

On January 9-10 Tom Marshall found two Arctic Skua, one juvenile and one adult, at Southshore, Christchurch. Both came through at 6 pm-ish each day as the tide was on the drop. The adult "in awesome plumage including tail plumes," made several passes through the estuary disturbing the White-fronted Terns. A white Welcome Swallow was seen in his garden by a man living on Monck's Spur Road, who also reported seeing Gull Bunting nearby. The white Welcome Swallow was sighted twice on 15th January, by Jan and Ann, this time on the other side of the Estuary on South Spit where Banding operations were underway. Jan also sighted a possible Little Tern, several people saw an oystercatcher (SIPO) with an all-white head and Andrew Crossland saw a skua. Most recently, Bev recorded a tattler species on 21st January at the Ashley River Mouth and in the same area the following day she and Eric saw a Black Stilt with a green band, and a Far Eastern Curlew.

A Must See...

Anyone interested in the environment and our effect upon it should not miss seeing the Fiona Hall Exhibition at the Christchurch Art Gallery, which ends on 15th February. Of particular interest to birders are two large museum-like glass display boxes contain dozens of different birds' nests, wonderfully woven from.... Well, see for yourself. Ed.

Lake Ellesmere Summer Wader Count – 13 December 2008

Compiled by Nick Allen

Kaitorete Spit to corner Kaituna Lagoon

Royal Spoonbill 2, Pied Oystercatcher 2, Pied Stilt 301, Banded Dotterel 100, Wrybill 233, Spur-winged Plover 18, Red-necked Stint 32, Bar-tailed Godwit 20, Caspian Tern 2

Kaituna Lagoon (shore nearest highway) - Halswell R

Royal Spoonbill 45, Pied Stilt 419, Hybrid Stilt 1, Banded Dotterel 12, Spur-winged Plover 4, Bar-tailed Godwit 68

Halswell R & Greenpark Sands

Australasian Bittern 5, Pied Stilt 212, Banded Dotterel 252, Wrybill 94, Pacific Golden Plover 42, Spur-winged Plover 67, Lesser Knot 5, Red-necked Stint 4, Bar-tailed Godwit 4, Caspian Tern 51

Embankment Road to Yarr's Wildlife Management Reserve

Banded Dotterel, 228, Spur-winged Plover 26, Pied Stilt 80, Wrybill 15, Red-necked Stint 2, Lesser Knot 5, Pacific Golden Plover 42

Rest of Lake

Australasian Crested Grebe 3, Royal Spoonbill 27, Mute Swan 3, Pied Oystercatcher 3, Pied Stilt 410, Banded Dotterel 18, Wrybill 5, Spur-winged Plover 26, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper 1

The Bitterns comprised a family group of 1 adult and 4 juveniles near a marsh next to the New Halswell River. The large group of Caspian Terns was a colony on an island and comprised 29 adults and 22 largish chicks. These are probably the same birds that deserted a colony near Embankment Road about 3-4 km away as the tern flies a couple of months ago.

Thanks to all the counters who turned out on a beautiful Canterbury day.

Update on the printing of Notornis

Jim Briskie has advised that a further two issues of Notornis (June 2008 and September 2008) will be ready for printing when the printer

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opens after the Christmas break in mid-January, and should be posted in late January/early February. A further two issues will follow in March/April 2009, including the March 2009 issue, which will then bring publishing up to date. Southern Bird will continue on its normal schedule.

David Lawrie Acting President OSNZ

OSNZ Information

Ingrid Hutzler, the Society's Executive Officer, has asked us to pass on the following information.

2009 OSNZ Conference:

The Registration Form and details for the conference are now available at website: www.osnz.org.nz

Beach Patrol and Nest Record Schemes:

The details of both of these schemes have been updated. You can now download the new Beach Patrol Data Sheet and Nest Record Card from www.osnz.org.nz/studies.htm

The interbreeding of South Island Oystercatchers with Variable (black) Oystercatchers

By Sheila Petch

In 1986 Kathleen Harrison and I saw a Black Variable Oystercatcher nesting with what we assumed was a Pied Variable Oystercatcher. It later turned out that this pair were one of the interbreeding pairs and the Pied Variable was actually a SIPO. In late 1989 Andrew Crossland noticed 2 pairs of birds nesting. Both pairs were a combination of Black Variable Oystercatcher and Pied Oystercatcher. One pair was about 3kms north of Saltwater Creek and the other pair was about 1/2 km north of Saltwater Creek. These areas are both in Ashworth's Lagoons. Both pairs nested on the beach.

In December 1992 Andrew banded a chick of the second pair. He then went overseas to work and Tony Crocker and I took over. We banded both adults of one pair and one adult of the

other pair between 1995 and 1997. We were able to track these birds and between 1995 and 2000 banded 8 chicks. Each had a green flag and one had a colour combination. This made a total of 9 chicks (including Andrew's first bird). Two of these banded hybrids were sighted in the



Photo: David McKenzie
Interbreeding pair of South Island Pied and Variable Oystercatchers, Oamaru Golf Course

North Island, one at Taporā in November 1998 and one at Matarangi in February 1999.

Over the years we have ascertained that the hybrid chicks have gone on to breed and produced their own young. Nick Allen was with me in November 2000 and read the metal band of Andrew's hybrid, confirming that the chick born in December 1992 was now a parent and had bred and produced young. These hybrids have gradually increased with nests spread from the Ashley River mouth North to Ashworth's Lagoons, about a 5km stretch. This November Jan Walker and I surveyed the 5km and counted 7 Hybrid pairs, 1 Hybrid/SIPO pair, 5 Black Variable/Hybrid pairs, 1 Hybrid bird by itself and 2 Black Variable pairs.

We found 4 nests and 5 chicks. Most birds were acting as if they had chicks but they are hard to find.

The first 2 pairs have produced at least 21 Hybrids and no doubt there are more. Oystercatchers breed at around 4 years of age and the life span can be around 27 years. A more detailed article will eventually be submitted to Notornis.

Godwit Banding at The Spit, Thursday 18th December.

By Ann Sherlock

The net setting team commenced work at 6.50 am and the nets were set on the beach side of the spit by 8.30am. Rob Schuckard explained to the 37 people present the various marker points, natural and manmade, which would show him where the birds needed to be positioned before the cannons were fired. He had an ingenious way to move the birds once in the catch zone, consisting of a line with bits of fabric tied to it, which he would gently pull. Known as 'the jiggle' this is supposed to move the birds out of harms way if they are too close to the firing edge. Oystercatchers are so laid-back, however, they just peck at the bits of fabric wiggling around like prey!!

Folk were positioned in the sand dunes well back from the net and shown how to made themselves inconspicuous. Then followed quite a long wait....



Photo: Jane Sedgeley

Birds were seen being 'twitched' in from the estuary side of the spit, their usual roost, by one or two experts – a remarkable sight. These slow shepherds had to contend with a microlight aircraft which flew over, round, back and forth, even attempting a few manoeuvres. The pilot finally may have got the message that he was not wanted from the exaggerated arm signals of David Melville below. A skua and an aeroplane also were responsible for the birds taking to the

air, necessitating more twitching back into place. The netted area seemed terribly small and the beach enormous.

Finally, at past 11 am and just when less determined watchers in the dunes were thinking the exercise may have to be aborted, there was a loud Whurrumphh, the birds took off and birders emerged rapidly from their hiding places and converged on the net to rescue the trapped birds, putting Godwits into blue boxes and releasing unwanted Oystercatchers. The 17 Godwits were transferred into holding pens, no more than 3 to a pen, whence they were taken as needed to the area set up for banding, measuring and weighing.



Photo: Jane Sedgeley
A "laid back" Godwit after flagging and banding

Quite frequently birds were found to be of interest to Rob and David and small feathers were removed for DNA testing, which will show where the birds have fed before their arrival back in New Zealand and indicate whether the birds had come from Siberia or Alaska. One very small male bird (Bill length (BL) 81mm; Weight (BW) 261g) created much interest because he may be yet another subspecies. Rob, reporting later on the various sites they had undertaken mist and cannon netting during their December visit, said:

"Of great interest was the catch of some very small godwit... Biometrics of these birds will be further assessed and of great interest will be the feather samples that could reveal the origin of these birds. It is possible that we are dealing with the elusive *anadyrensis* subspecies from

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Chukotka (NE Russia) or simply a smallish version of the *baueri* species from Alaska.”



Photo: Ann Sherlock
David inspecting one of the small birds from which a feather was taken for analysis

17 birds were banded. Females are bigger than males, with an average BL of 115mm, and BW of 364g against the average male BL of 91mm and BW of 364g. On Thursday the shortest bill was 76mm and the longest 120g. The lightest bird weighed 247g and the heaviest 385g.

Birds banded in the South Island have a white flag on the left leg, and a metal band with a number on the right tibia [top part of leg]. 4 colour bands go on the tarsi [bottom of leg], 2 on each leg. The colours are White, Blue, Yellow and Red. Anyone observing banded birds on the Estuary is asked to record the band combinations and put them on the OSNZ website. How to do this can be seen on the website www.osnz.org.nz Follow the links to Arctic Wader Banding programme.

All of the new birds banded on 15th Dec have been resighted so we know they survived the initial stress of capture and handling. The 13 OSNZ members who helped at this event were part of a project with far-reaching implications for the future of these birds.

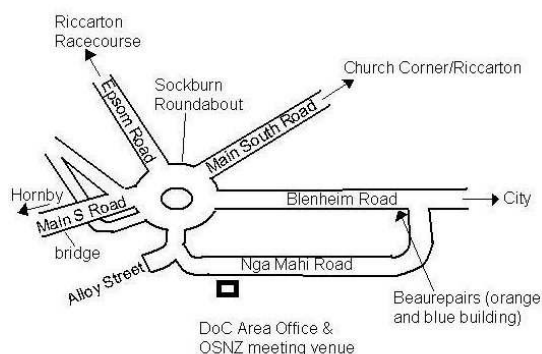


Photo: Ann Sherlock
Bon voyage

What's on at OSNZ Canterbury: January to May 2009

Indoor Meetings

Evening indoor meetings take place at 7.30 pm on the last Monday of the month at the Mahaanui Area DOC office, 31 Nga Mahi Drive, off Blenheim Road, Sockburn. There is plenty of parking at the premises and on the road.



Monday February 23: Members Evening. If you have had a birding trip or other experience of interest to members which you would like to share, please contact Jan.

Monday March 30: AGM followed by a talk by Paul Scofield on how to use eBird to record bird observations.

Monday April 27: Colin O'Donnell of DOC will up-date members on work being done on endangered species in the South Island.

Monday May 25: Kerry-Jane Wilson will speak on "Seabird Colonies of New Zealand: What we know and what we don't know."

Field Meetings

Saturday January 31: Mini Twitchathon and BBQ, Victoria Park, entrance at the top of Hackthorne Road. Meet at the carpark by children's play area at 3pm. An occasion for all the family, twitching birds seen and heard, followed by a BBQ. Lots of prizes! Please bring your own food, drink etc and seating. Jan would be grateful to hear from people who could provide gas BBQ's, essential because of the fire risk. Contact: Jan.

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Sunday February 8: A second summer Wader Count at Lake Ellesmere. Meet at the end of Embankment Road, 9 am. Contact: Colin or Jan.

Saturday and Sunday February 21 and 22: The George Chance Census of Great Crested Grebes. We will survey lakes within the Canterbury province and will need as many participants as possible. More details later on where to meet to organise into groups and for car pooling. Contact: Jan.

Saturday March 21: Farewell to the Waders, Lake Ellesmere. See the waders in their breeding colours before they depart for the Arctic breeding grounds. Meet at the end of Embankment Road, 9am. Contact: Colin or Jan.

Easter Weekend – Friday 10th to Monday 13th April: Trip to the Ross area of the West Coast. We stay at the Harihari Field Station, Cost \$22 per night. You need your own sleeping bag. Food will be done as cheaply as possible. Bring your own breakfast and lunch. There is a pub in Ross and a West Coast Member has offered to cook an evening meal for \$20 – their own meat and fresh garden vegetables. Nick Allen's possible itinerary for a "fairly relaxed weekend" includes kayaking on the West Coast member's swamp, a kiwi tour at Okarito, forest birding and counting lake birds. Contact: Nick asap.

Saturday May 16: Trip to the Hawdon Valley to hunt for bush birds, particularly Mohua (Yellowhead) and Orange-fronted parakeet. Meet at Yaldhurst pub by Robbie's Restaurant, 8.30 am. A river-crossing is involved so wear tramping boots or solid footwear – not gumboots. Contact: Bev Alexander.



Photo: Nick Ledgard
Black-billed gull colony with chicks - What Nick calls the Ashley River's "hotspot"

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PS to Ashley River Survey – 23 Jan

(see p9)

Just after the survey 200 hundred Black-billed Gulls arrived off Groyne 1, most likely birds displaced by the Waimakariri floods. A month later the number had risen to 326 birds. Over 100 pairs appeared to have nests. At least 5 of these birds were banded as chicks by Sheila in 1997. They initially settled where about 100 Black-fronted terns were nesting but Nick Ledgard thinks the Black-billed Gulls displaced them as by early January there were few terns on this site. There is some argument about the number of Black-billed gull chicks in the colony and a proper count has yet to be made, but local Group members reckon there are close to 200.

Regarding Wrybill, Chairman of the Group, Nick Ledgard, knows of 6 breeding attempts which have resulted in eggs or chicks, but 4 of them have failed to fledge any chicks. One has a chick flying, and another has 2 which are 2 weeks away from being airborne.

Ashley River Bird Count, November 2008

The annual November Ashley River bird count was held on 22 November 2008. As with last year, counts of most species were about average (Table 1).

The biggest differences with the long-term average occurred with black-billed gulls and spur-winged plovers. The former is no surprise, as unless there is a gull colony (sometimes large) there are usually not many about. But it was surprising to see so few plovers, as they have been the big increasers over the last 3 years (last year we had 116 - this year 11).

Black-fronted terns. Numbers (81) were the similar to last year (89) and similar to the 7 year average of 78. Most were in three colonies of between 15-25 birds .

Wrybill. Numbers (8) were near average (10), although a week prior 11 were seen on the river. Only 2 were banded (survey), although 4 banded birds have been seen this season.

Black stilt. Our regular bird was again at the Dalziels site – for the 5th year now.

Table 1. November bird counts, Ashley River, 2000–2008

Species	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	Ave	Median
Black Shag	18	3		8	7	2	2	10	9	7	8
Little Shag	3	6		4	7	6	2	4	0	4	3
SI Pied Oystercatcher	25	22		22	37	22	5	26	27	23	25
Variable Oystercatcher	-	-			2	0	0	0	0	1	0
Pied Stilt	229	82		138	140	137	68	164	131	137	138
Black Stilt					2	1	1	1	1	1	1
Banded Dotterel	199	130		169	213	245	84	237	198	184	199
Wrybill	17	7		16	9	7	5	9	8	10	9
Spur-winged Plover	18			13	27	149	37	116	11	53	27
Black-billed Gull	314	3		0	10	1	213	13	10	75	13
Black-backed Gull	26			10	27	3	5	12	16	14	12
Black-fronted Tern	74	44		102	28	26	180	89	81	78	74
Caspian Tern	0	0		4	0	0	1	0	0	1	0

No count 2002 because of flood

Paradise ducks. Plenty, and some pairs with impressive broods (one had 16 ducklings)

The river level was 0.37 m and the flow was around 2 cumecs at the Ashley Gorge. Despite dire forecasts beforehand, conditions were great for a survey – overcast but mild, with light winds. Thanks to members of the Ornithological Society, Forest & Bird, Rangiora Tramping Club, Environment Canterbury, and Ashley/Rakahuri Rivercare Group who turned up to do the counts (Jan Walker, Peter Gibbons, Andrew McBeth, Keith and Mave Hamilton and daughter, Kate Roughan, Simon Woods, Dave Henley, Geoff Swales, Paul Gunningham, Chris Martin, Nick Ledgard). Your help is much appreciated. I think everyone enjoyed their morning.

Nick Ledgard, 24 November 2008

