



1. Birders find their place at Aka Aka (L-R): Ian Southey, Amber Calman (front), George Hobson, Bradley Shields, Genevieve Piton, Dayna Davies, Finn Davey, Joe Dillon, Emma Williams (front), Chelsea Ralls.



2. Ian Southey with Australasian Bittern. Photo by Emma Williams.



3. Making sure the tags are working before we release the bittern. Photo by Chelsea Ralls.

## Aka Aka swampbird Youth Camp

I have participated in a number of the Birds New Zealand Youth Camps which are designed to encourage and educate Young Birders. It does take a bit of work and can get harder than it seems it should, but I enjoy the enthusiasm of the young participants, watching them find new birds and discover new aspects of birding. The participants seem to get their rewards too, finding friends and coming back. These Youth Camps are designed to introduce Young Birders to a range of experiences, but perhaps some of the older ones were ready for more of a challenge.

South Auckland began working around the lower Waikato River last year and discovered a wonderful wilderness of wetlands. There were good swamp birds such as Australasian Bittern, Spotless Crake and Fernbird, and access that ranged from easy to challenging. For this Youth Camp (5-10th Oct) we slept in tents, had them all help with the chores, and were joined by swamp bird scientist Emma Williams who was both educational and entertaining.

There were seven participants. They all seemed to like the water, mud and dense vegetation, and were keen to get into the thick of it. The pristine Kahikatea forest was laced with big tangles of Kiekie and threaded by a track that mostly required wading with random roots and mud patches. The Raupo was no better but at other times we could stroll along stop-banks. The Young Birders were already able to manage five-minute bird counts and the playback survey for crakes and Fernbirds, and a lot of checklists were submitted to the Atlas (see *eBird*).

We had planned a bittern survey but ended up locating a site where Emma could select a bird and set out a trap to catch it. This was easier said than done. A small team tramped through the dense vegetation carrying the cage trap and loud speaker in the morning and then, when it was checked in the afternoon, there was a bittern crouched in the cage trap. It was brought back to the stop bank, processed, fitted with a satellite tracker and released. Undaunted by its capture it turned to threaten us, gathered its dignity and stalked off into the swamp. Fantastic. We tried twice more but caught no others.

Local members helped and loaned gear but it was Chelsea Ralls who organised most of the logistics and made the camp work. John Charteris was a fantastic boatman while Stu and Kim Muir have not only cared for the river but were tremendous hosts making Te Papa eco-cottage available, arranging access and feeding us whitebait. We are grateful to the Society's President and Council for letting us proceed at fairly short notice. There seems to be a keen appetite for more project driven Youth Camps if anyone is willing to organise them.

IAN SOUTHEY

I was one of the lucky seven Young Birders that attended this awesome Youth Camp focused on monitoring and conservation of swamp birds:

**Day 1:** We arrived at Aka Aka where we camped on farmland overlooking the Waikato River. We met Stu the farmer who told us about his efforts to restore swamp habitat. After dinner, we all went to the swamp to listen for Australasian Bitterns and learn how to record them by taking compass bearings and counting how many booms each bird did.

**Day 2:** We did 5-minute bird counts in groups at several locations. My group met local skipper John who took us to Motutieke Island on the river. It was really cool to see the pristine Kahikatea swamp habitat. Species of note were Australasian Bittern, Spotless Crake and Fernbird.

**Day 3:** More bird counts in new areas. Emma Williams joined our group sharing her expertise on bitterns. That evening we returned to the swamp to try to find a bittern to catch by triangulating its booms.

**Day 4:** Emma, Genevieve and I waded into the swamp and set up the cage trap. We returned to check it a few hours later and found we had a bittern! We took it back out to the edge where we could safely handle it and everyone could have a good look. After taking measurements and fitting it with a radio transmitter we released it. As Ian put the bird down it puffed up its feathers and opened its beak in an aggressive threat display which was cool to watch - from a distance.

**Day 5:** The trap was reset in a similar location but we did not catch another bittern. George did some radio-tracking of the bittern caught the previous day and ended up coming close enough to check that it was okay. We also did more bird counts.

**Day 6:** We tried to catch another bittern before it rained, but the trap was empty.

**Day 7:** Our last day was spent cleaning and packing, and saying goodbye to everyone who made this thrilling camp possible.

Special thanks to Ian Southey for organising it and making sure we had a fun-filled itinerary; Chelsea Ralls for her organisation and the meals; Emma Williams for coming from Christchurch to share your knowledge of bitterns, and helping us catch one; Stu Muir for being such a great host and inspiring conservationist; and John Charteris for being our boat skipper. I'd also like to thank my fellow Young Birders: George Hobson, Joe Dillon, Finn Davey, Dayna Davies, Amber Calman and Genevieve Piton. Thanks for your constant enthusiasm and passion, and for caring about our endangered species.

BRADLEY SHIELDS