



Black-billed gull (*Chroicocephalus bulleri*) colony on the banks of the Manawatū R, opposite its confluence with the Pohangina R (photo: Peter Frost)

**Report of a field trip to Ashhurst Domain and Manawatū River,
17 November 2019**

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Background

A joint Whanganui Museum Botanical Group – Birds New Zealand (Whanganui) field trip to Ashhurst Domain was held on 17th November 2019. Fourteen people took part in the field trip, most of whom were focused on observing and documenting the plants of the area. Three people (Tarnia and Sean Hodges and I) concentrated on birds, with another Birds New Zealand member (Sue Moore) dividing her time between looking at plants and noting birds. Several New Zealand Bird Atlas checklists were filled in and submitted to eBird.

The aim of the trip was to explore the river terrace forests below the Domain, near the confluence of the Pohangina and Manawatu Rivers. In the search for birds, the field trip also extended along the true right-hand bank of the Manawatu R from the Domain to the confluence. The forest exists on two terraces, with some notable botanical differences between them. Much of the older, upper Ashhurst Terrace (Heerdegen 1982; Clement et al. 2010) has been cleared for recreational purposes, and comprises mostly lawns, planted trees and shrubs, and some flower beds. The remaining native forest is concentrated along the eastern edge. It is relatively dry, with totara (*Podocarpus totara*), matai (*Prumnopitys taxifolia*), titoki (*Alectryon excelsus*) and kanuka (*Kunzea ericoides*) common to locally dominant in the canopy (Ogle & Perrie 2010). It also contains some notable ground-level plants such as giant maidenhair fern (*Adiantum formosum*) and bamboo rice-grass (*Microlaena polynoda*).

The lower, younger, Holocene-age Raukawa Terrace (Heerdegen 1982; Clement et al. 2010) is wetter, with forest dominated by swamp maire (*Syzygium maire*) and pukatea (*Laurelia novae-zelandiae*), with totara, matai and kanuka also present in drier patches. The forest on both terraces has been disturbed, probably mainly by flooding, and therefore contains several non-native plant species. The neighbouring Manawatu R is flanked by large-boulder gravel beds covered densely with crack willow (*Salix fragilis*) and other shrubs. There is also a small wetland at the foot of the upper terrace lying to the north of Domain. The birds on it were observable from a lookout situated on the terrace above the wetland. The track of the areas visited during the field trip are shown in Figure 1.

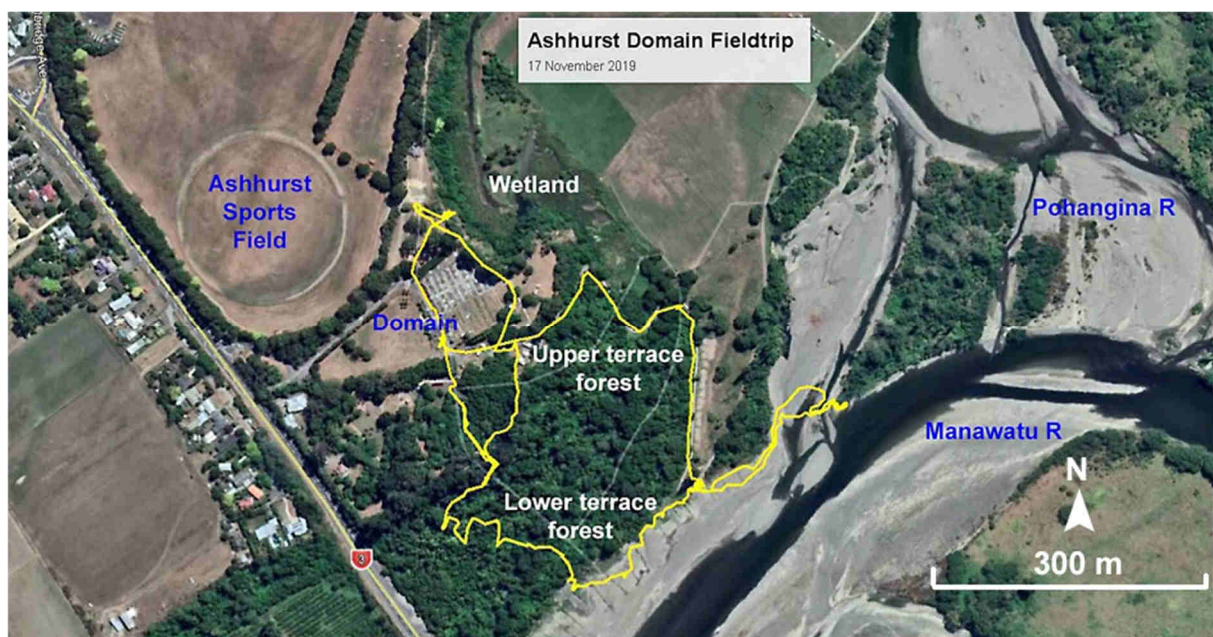


Fig 1. GPS track (yellow) of areas covered during the field trip.

Birds

A total of 346 individuals of 34 species was recorded on seven checklists submitted personally to eBird (Table 1). This included a colony of 148 black-billed gulls (*Chroicocephalus bulleri*), about 65 of which were either sitting on or standing over nests situated on the true left-hand bank of the Manawatū R, opposite the confluence of the Pohangina R (front page photograph). This is a previously unrecorded colony and perhaps only the second colony recorded west of the Tararua-Ruahine range, across which the Manawatū R flows. In the southern North Island, black-billed gulls nest on several gravel-bedded rivers in the Wairarapa (Mischler 2018). In mid-December 2016, John Cockrem (Massey University) reported seeing 8–9 pairs nesting on the gravel bed of the Manawatū R at Palmerston North (Phil Battley pers. comm.). Mischler (2018) reports a colony of 11 nesting pairs at what appears to be the same site in the same 2016/17 breeding season. This does not seem to have been a permanent colony site, however, so it is possible that the present colony represents a movement and enlargement of the earlier colony.

Another uncommon species that we recorded along the Manawatū R was black-fronted dotterel (*Elsyornis melanops*). Two birds were found near the confluence of the Pohangina and Manawatū rivers (Fig. 1). Like the black-billed gull, this is another species that is more common east of the Tararua-Ruahine range. Although the birds flew around calling intermittently, there was no evidence that they were nesting.



Fig. 2 One of two black-fronted dotterel (*Elsyornis melanops*) seen on the Manawatū R near its confluence with the Pohangina R.

Within the forest, although there were some differences in the number of bird species and individuals recorded in the two forest types, none of these can be considered definitive at this stage. Tui (*Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae*) were apparently more common in the upper than lower terrace forests even though more time was spent in the latter forest type. The larger number of bellbird (*Anthornis melanura*), grey warbler (*Gerygone igata*), silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis*) and chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*) recorded in the lower terrace forest is probably an artefact of the greater amount of time spent there.

A range of other species were recorded only in the more open habitats along the riverbank or in the Domain, where lawns predominate. A New Zealand falcon, which from its size was thought to be a female, was seen flying over the Domain. What is presumed to be the same bird was later seen flying over the lower terrace forest. Undoubtedly, the open areas of the Domain and the abundance of species such as blackbirds (*Turdus merula*), adjacent to good cover provided by the forest edge probably made the area ideal for a bird predator such as falcon.

The viewpoint overlooking the wetland was too far to allow that habitat to be surveyed thoroughly. Nevertheless, two pairs of pukeko were seen, one with a large downy chick, the other accompanied by two juveniles. There was also an adult black swan (*Cygnus atratus*) with three large feathered cygnets, one of which was clearly leucistic and the other two possibly so, appearing paler than normal (Fig. 3). There were also two fledged juveniles.



Fig. 3 Leucistic black swan cygnets seen at the Ashhurst Domain wetland. Although the right-hand bird looks like an albino, eye colour and the presence of a few darker feathers indicate that this bird is leucistic not an albino. Note the abundance of *Azolla rubra*, completely covering the water surface, suggesting a hypertrophic water body.

Overall, several interesting species were recorded on this field trip. The area would be worth longer follow-up visits at other times of the year.

References

- Clement, A.J.; Sloss, C.R.; Fuller, I.C. 2010. Late Quaternary geomorphology of the Manawatu coastal plain, North Island, New Zealand. *Quaternary International*, 221, 36-45. Online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.quaint.2009.07.005>
- Heerdegen, R.G. 1983. Landforms of the Manawatu. In J.M. Soons and M.J. Selby (eds) *Landforms of New Zealand*, 213–231. Longman Paul, Auckland.
- Mischler, C.P. 2018. Estimating the breeding population of black-billed gulls *Larus bulleri* in New Zealand, and methods for future count surveys. *Notornis*, 65, 67–83.
- Ogle, C.C.; Perrie, L. 2010. Vascular plants for Ashhurst Domain. Whanganui Plant List x (typescript). Whanganui Museum Botanical Group, Whanganui.

Table 1. Checklists of birds recorded during a joint Whanganui Museum Botanical Group/Birds New Zealand (Whanganui) field trip to Ashurst Domain, Manawatū, and the adjacent Manawatū R, 17 November 2019. The figures represent the numbers of individuals of each species recorded during the relevant checklist period.

		Ashhurst Domain Picnic Area	Upper terrace forest	Swamp forest track	Riverbank to Pohangina R confluence	Forest terrace path	Recreation area edge	Wetland lookout
Time		9:55 AM	10:22 AM	10:45 AM	11:29 AM	1:14 PM	1:30 PM	1:44 PM
Type of count		Stationary	Travelling	Travelling	Travelling	Stationary	Travelling	Stationary
Time (min)		15	22	40	55	8	12	19
Distance (km)		0	0.68	0.60	0.70	0	0.34	0
Latitude		-40.3020	-40.3020	-40.3030	-40.3041	-40.3031	-40.3027	-40.3004
Longitude		175.7555	175.7555	175.7581	175.7591	175.7579	175.7578	175.7572
Species	eBird Checklist	S61500351	S61501654	S61514114	S61514253	S61506257	S61506760	S61507300
Black Swan	<i>Cygnus atratus</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	6
Paradise Shelduck	<i>Tadorna variegata</i>	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Grey Teal	<i>Anas gracilis</i>	-	-	-	4	-	-	-
Rock Pigeon (Feral Pigeon)	<i>Columba livia</i>	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
New Zealand Pigeon	<i>Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae</i>	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
Shining Cuckoo	<i>Chrysococcyx lucidus</i>	-	-	1	1	-	-	-
Pukeko	<i>Porphyrio melanotus</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	6
Pied Stilt	<i>Himantopus leucocephalus</i>	-	-	-	4	-	-	-
Black-fronted Dotterel	<i>Elseya melanops</i>	-	-	-	2	-	-	-
Black-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus bulleri</i>	-	-	-	148	-	-	-
South Black Backed Gull	<i>Larus dominicanus</i>	-	-	-	3	-	-	-
Black Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
White-faced Heron	<i>Egretta novaehollandiae</i>	-	-	-	2	-	-	-
Sacred Kingfisher	<i>Todiramphus sanctus</i>	-	-	-	1	-	1	-
New Zealand Falcon	<i>Falco novaeseelandiae</i>	1	-	1	-	-	-	-
Eastern Rosella	<i>Platycercus eximius</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	2

Table 1 (cont.). Checklists of birds recorded during a joint Whanganui Museum Botanical Group/Birds New Zealand (Whanganui) field trip to Ashurst Domain, Manawatū, and the adjacent Manawatū R, 17 November 2019. The figures represent the numbers of individuals of each species recorded during the relevant checklist period.

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Species	eBird Checklist	S61500351	S61501654	S61514114	S61514253	S61506257	S61506760	S61507300
Tui	<i>Prothemadera novaeseelandiae</i>	2	4	2	-	3	4	-
Bellbird	<i>Anthornis melanura</i>	-	1	2	-	-	-	-
Grey Warbler	<i>Gerygone igata</i>	-	1	4	-	-	-	1
Australian Magpie	<i>Gymnorhina tibicen</i>	3	-	-	1	-	-	1
New Zealand Fantail	<i>Rhipidura fuliginosa</i>	1	2	1	1	-	2	1
Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	-	-	-	3	1	-	-
Welcome Swallow	<i>Hirundo neoxena</i>	-	-	-	5	-	-	-
Silvereye	<i>Zosterops lateralis</i>	-	2	6	-	4	2	3
European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	4	-	-	1	-	-	-
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	-	-	1	-	-	-	2
Eurasian Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	7	6	3	3	3	7	3
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	6	-	-	-	-	4	-
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	3	4	7	4	4	4	2
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	2	1	1	4	-	3	2
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	-	-	-	1	-	-	-