



Red Knot (*Calidris canutus*) and Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*) roosting

Birds New Zealand (Whanganui Region)
Report of a field trip to Manawatū Estuary and places on the way
14 March 2020

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Background

Each year, the Manawatū Estuary Trust (MET) organises a 'Farewell to the Birds' event at the Manawatū Estuary, Foxton Beach. This is to celebrate the impending departure of Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*, Red/Lesser Knot *Calidris canutus*, and any other northern hemisphere migrants for their Arctic breeding grounds by way of a stopover in the Yellow Sea and other sites in East Asia. The Trust also organises the reciprocal event, 'Welcome to the Birds', to mark the birds' return in September/October each year. These events present people who are interested in birds, including local Birds New Zealand members, an opportunity to observe these species at significant points in their annual cycle, but also to renew acquaintances and make new one among like-minded people. The Whanganui branch of Birds New Zealand always receives an invitation to join these celebrations and we do our best to support the Trust by participating.

This year's 'Farewell to the Birds' took place on Saturday 14th March and a field trip was accordingly organised to attend it. Given that the event started formally at 1:30 p.m. (timed to broadly coincide with high tide), the trip provided an opportunity to visit various other places on route to complete some New Zealand Bird Atlas cards. Unfortunately, only one person—I—took part in the full field trip, although Paul and Jane Gibson, and Carren and Paul Jones, all from Whanganui, travelled separately to Foxton Beach and joined around 43 others from elsewhere in the Manawatū and Horowhenua regions. In whatever way one got to the 'Farewell to the Birds' event, a good selection of both northern migrants and more local species was seen and enjoyed by all.

Following a welcome from Kevin Lane, chair of the MET, and a karakia and hymn from a member of the Ratana Church, Professor Phil Battley from Massey University outlined the present status of the Bar-tailed Godwit and Red Knot on the estuary, noting that the numbers of both species had been in decline both locally and nationally for some years, but that this year had been marked by the arrival of an higher-than-usual number of young godwits, suggesting that the 2019 summer in the Arctic has been an exceptional breeding year. Present research was focusing on what these juveniles now did during the coming winter, when most are likely to stay in New Zealand. This report details the birds seen during the event, as well as the places visited and the birds seen on the field trip from Whanganui to Foxton Beach.

Areas surveyed and birds seen

Six areas were surveyed: Bell Street, outside the police station (a list of birds seen while waiting for anyone to turn up); the Whanganui estuary; a wooded infilled oxbow of the Rangitikei R; the eastern side of the Rangitikei R around the boat-launch ramp; a constructed wetland on the outskirts of Foxton Beach (Palmer Road Pond); and Manawatū estuary sandspit and immediately adjacent waters, where birds were roosting at high tide. These surveys varied in duration, depending on the size of the area and number of birds present, and were mostly 'stationary counts' (ones made from a fixed position). The two 'travelling' counts involved only short walks to get better views of the different areas being surveyed. Details of the areas, times, durations of counts, and birds recorded are listed in Table 1.

1. Bell Street

Nothing exceptional was recorded in this urban setting, although a lone New Zealand Pigeon or Kererū *Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*, flying from the direction of the James McGregor Memorial Park to Pukenamu Queens Park, was notable. The other species seen are all common urban residents.

2. Whanganui R Estuary

I surveyed the birds present on the mudflats of Whanganui R estuary from the Whanganui Sailing Club. The mudflats were fully exposed, being low tide, and the surveyed area stretched from about halfway to Beach Rd down to the Gilbert St boat-launch ramp, and out to the mid-river sand bar. The main species of interest was Bar-tailed Godwit, 8 individuals of which were present, including presumably the male AJD, being the only male in near-full breeding plumage present. Even with a telescope, however, most godwits were too far out, foraging on the edge of the tide, to be reliably sexed or their age determined. One Royal Spoonbill *Platalea regia*, one Pied Shag *Phalacrocorax varius*, two Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia* and 10 South Island Pied Oystercatchers *Haematopus finschi* and 17 Pied Stilt *Himantopus leucocephalus*, were the other more notable species recorded.

3. 1628 Tangimoana Rd

A roadside stop was made alongside this well-wooded area, part of an old oxbow of the Rangitikei R. The mix of native and exotic trees was partly screened by a roadside belt of pine trees. Observations were made from under that shelterbelt, the main aim being to see which native species might occur there. Apart from Grey Warbler *Gerygone igata*, New Zealand Fantail *Rhipidura fuliginosa* and Silvereye *Zosterops lateralis*, the other species were all introduced ones. Tūi *Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae* and Bellbird *Anthornis melanura* were both expected but not recorded.

4. Rangitikei Estuary (Boat-launch Ramp, Tangimoana)

It was still largely low tide when this area was surveyed, so most birds recorded were some distance away from the viewpoint. The highlights were 16 Bar-tailed Godwit, 2 Variable Oystercatcher *Haematopus unicolor*, 7 Black Shag *Phalarocorax carbo* and 16 Canada Geese *Branta canadensis*, although none of these were unexpected (likewise with all the few other species recorded).

5. Palmer Road Pond, Foxton Beach

Although there are several ponds around which a new subdivision of Foxton Beach has recently been built, the most often surveyed pond is that lying at the entrance to the complex. It has proved to be profitable in the past but, on this occasion, it was disappointing. Of waterfowl, only 19 Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*; four Mallard x Grey Duck hybrids *Anas platyrhynchos x superciliosa*, one of which had markedly pale cheeks and neck; three Black Swan *Cygnus atratus*; one New Zealand Dabchick *Poliiocephalus rufpectus*; and a couple of semi-domestic Greylag x Swan Goose hybrids *Anser anser x cygnoides* were noted.

The pond water was green, suggesting a cyanobacterial bloom, an indicator of hyper-eutrophication. This may become a permanent feature of these ponds as they are small, apparently without any significant outlets, and are filled almost entirely by run-off from surrounding properties where, judging from their well-manicured gardens, widespread use of garden fertilizer is likely. Given some around 47 eBird checklists submitted over the past 10 years (<https://ebird.org/newzealand/hotspot/L4063717>) it should be possible to see if, in time, the surrounding development is affecting birdlife on this pond and, if so, in what ways.

6. Sandspit, Manawatū Estuary, Foxton Beach

Around 47 people attended the 'Farewell to the Birds' event and saw a range of species (Fig. 1). Foremost among these were three northern migrants: Bar-tailed Godwit (I noted 102 individuals, many of them marked with colour bands); Red or Lesser Knot (60 counted) and Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva* (2). Several of the godwits and knots were in breeding plumage (Fig. 2 and title page photograph), while the golden plovers were gradually moulting into theirs.



Fig. 1. Some of the 47 people who attended the annual 'Farewell to the Birds' event at the Manawatū Estuary, Foxton Beach, 14 March 2020.

In addition to the northern migrants, several notable resident New Zealand species were also present. These included 29 Wrybill *Anarhynchus frontalis*; 97 Pied Stilt; 37 Black-billed Gull *Chroicocephalus bulleri* (but only a single Red-billed Gull *Chroicocephalus novaehollandiae*, as far as it was possible to tell); two Caspian Tern; and four Pied Shag. The last species is one that has only become resident on the estuary in the last decade or so, having previously only been an intermittent visitor. Good views of all these species were obtained by everyone, aided by several spotting scopes set up to give people close-up views of the birds. The weather played its part, being clear, calm, sunny and warm.



Fig. 2. Bar-tailed Godwit, Pied Stilt and a solitary Red Knot (partly obscured, second from the left) roosting at high tide on the Manawatū Estuary sandspit, Foxton Beach.

Incidental observations

The Manawatū Estuary is one of six sites in New Zealand designated as a wetland of international importance under the *Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat*. The designation was based primarily on the grounds that it regularly supports 1% of the individuals in a population of one species, in this case the Wrybill. This South Island breeding species winters in the North Island, and uses the estuary on its annual migration between them. But the estuary was also seen to be a multi-use resource area, one in which it might be possible to learn how to manage the various demands being made on it for recreation, fisheries and hunting. One pertinent example of the challenges was seen during the event, when a couple and their dog walked right along the spit, ignoring signs to the contrary, disturbing the birds as they went. Other than putting a leash on their dog, they ignored calls to get off the sandspit (Fig. 3).



Fig 3. One of the many challenges facing those working to protect the estuary and birds.

Table 1. List of sites visited and bird species seen during the field trip to the Manawatū Estuary, 14 March 2020.

	Location	10 Bell Street, Whanganui	Whanganui Sailing Club, Whanganui	1628 Tangimoana Rd, Tangimoana	Boat Launch Ramp, Rangitikei R, Tangimoana	Palmer Rd pond, Foxton Beach	Manawatū estuary sandspit, Foxton Beach
	Time	8:56	9:15	10:56	11:25	12:28	13:10
	Type of count	Stationary	Stationary	Stationary	Travelling	Travelling	Stationary
	Duration (min)	9	30	10	17	10	90
	Distance (km)	-	-	-	0.48	0.13	-
	Latitude	-39.9307	-39.9508	-40.2953	-40.2992	-40.4578	-40.4685
	Longitude	175.0549	175.0126	175.2781	175.2331	175.229	175.2296
Species	eBird checklist	S65765411	S65765433	S65765434	S65765442	S65765446	S65765502
Greylag x Swan Goose (Domestic hybrid)	<i>Anser anser x cygnoides</i>					2	
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>				16		
Black Swan	<i>Cygnus atratus</i>					3	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		2		29	19	
Mallard x Grey Duck (hybrid)	<i>Anas platyrhynchos x superciliosa</i>					4	
New Zealand Dabchick	<i>Poliiocephalus rufopectus</i>					1	
Rock Pigeon (feral)	<i>Columba livia</i>	1					
New Zealand Pigeon	<i>Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae</i>	1					
Pied Stilt	<i>Himantopus leucocephalus</i>		17		3		97
South Island Pied Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus finschi</i>		10				
Variable Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus unicolor</i>				2		
Pacific Golden-Plover	<i>Pluvialis fulva</i>						2
Spur-winged Plover	<i>Vanellus miles</i>	2	3		3		
Banded Dotterel	<i>Charadrius bicinctus</i>						1
Wrybill	<i>Anarhynchus frontalis</i>						29
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		8		16		102
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>						60
Black-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus bulleri</i>		1				37
Red-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus novaehollandiae</i>		64		2		1
South Black Backed Gull	<i>Larus dominicanus</i>		206		56		4

continued on next page.

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Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>		2		1		2
White-fronted Tern	<i>Sterna striata</i>						5
Black Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				7		
Pied Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax varius</i>		1				4
White-faced Heron	<i>Egretta novaehollandiae</i>				1		
Royal Spoonbill	<i>Platalea regia</i>		1				
Australasian Harrier	<i>Circus approximans</i>						1
Grey Warbler	<i>Gerygone igata</i>			3			
Australian Magpie	<i>Gymnorhina tibicen</i>			3		1	
New Zealand Fantail	<i>Rhipidura fuliginosa</i>			2			
Welcome Swallow	<i>Hirundo neoxena</i>		3			3	2
Silvereye	<i>Zosterops lateralis</i>	3		4			
European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	7	26	2		1	
Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	3					
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	1					
Eurasian Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	3		2		2	
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>				1		
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	3				15	
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>			4			
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>				2		
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>				4	2	