

## The Great Godwit Count - February 2020 Bar-tailed Godwit census

Last August (2019) our Alaskan colleagues at USGS, led by Dan Ruthrauff, completed a very successful aerial survey of post-breeding Bar-tailed Godwits *Limosa lapponica baueri*, covering the entire Yukon-Kuskokwin Delta and the Alaska Peninsula – the first such survey since 1997.

This provided us with a unique opportunity to compare the Alaskan aerial survey with non-breeding counts in the southern hemisphere to allow an update of the total population. The continuing shortages of food at the major staging ground used by Bar-tailed Godwits in China (Yalu Jiang National Nature Reserve, Liaoning) is placing stress on the population and accurate information is urgently needed.

The Great Godwit Count took place in early February 2020, during a prolonged high tide series between 8 and 14 February 2020 (a few counts had to be made outside this period for logistical reasons). Birds NZ members made a fantastic effort to cover as many sites as possible, in some cases facing difficult conditions – vehicles bogged, high temperatures causing heat stress etc. Thanks to financial support from the BirdsNZ Project Assistance Fund it was possible to use a helicopter to survey estuaries in the Far North – see Les Feasey’s report on <https://www.birdsnz.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/2003-Article-Godwit-Aerial-Survey-Northland.pdf>.

A **HUGE “THANK YOU”** to the 182 counters who took part in the census.

A total of 81,549 Bar-tailed Godwits was counted; 71% on the North Island and 29% on the South Island. Across the country, 21 sites held more than 1,000 godwits - these in total support 75% of the national population.

Number crunching is continuing and we are liaising with counters in eastern Australia to try to come up with a total non-breeding population for the *baueri* Alaskan-breeding population. Further details will appear in due course.

It appears that 2019 may have been a good breeding season, judging from the number of juvenile Bar-tailed Godwits which arrived at a number of sites around the country – and this may be reflected in the forthcoming **June 2020 national wader census**.

In the meantime, you can see where some of these juveniles are by checking out sat-tagged birds at [http://behavioural-ecology.orn.mpg.de:3838/NZ2019\\_BTGO/](http://behavioural-ecology.orn.mpg.de:3838/NZ2019_BTGO/)

Rob Schuckard and David Melville  
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*Large numbers of Bar-tailed Godwits arrived in New Zealand in the spring after what appears to have been a very good breeding season in Alaska. Photo: Phil Battley*