

SHORT NOTE

Pied Stilts pursue an eel

At 9.30 p.m. on 23 January 1993, while at the Hawksbury Lagoon, Waikouaiti, Otago, I saw two adult and two juvenile Pied Stilts (*Himantopus leucocephalus*) moving forward with what appeared to be common purpose. The birds were in a 1-2 metre group and uttering alarm calls.

The birds were about 20 metres away in a shallow triangle-shaped lagoon, in the middle of the main lagoons. This smaller lagoon, formed by causeways, was open to the main system by a gap of 2-3 metres.

I could see in the water a metre ahead of the birds something swimming. As they continued, it became clear that they were following an eel. The eel appeared to be 750 mm long, and its dorsal fin occasionally broke the surface. The water was 50-75 mm deep. The group followed the eel for 5 metres before allowing it to swim a further 5 metres alone. At this point the group returned to feed on the opposite side of the lagoon. They remained in a close group.

After the eel had swum the 5 metres, it turned through 90°, swam a short distance parallel to a causeway, turned again and approached the group from a different angle. This now required the eel to swim 10 metres, which it did in a direct line.

This time one of the juveniles led the charge. After being confronted, the eel turned through 180° and swam away. The juvenile followed in a straight line for 10 metres, staying between 500 and 1000 mm away from the eel. At least one of the adults followed 1-2 metres back. As the eel got close to the far bank, it turned and lifted one-third of its length out of the water and seemed to lunge at the juvenile. The bird jumped back in alarm and returned to where the family group had been feeding. The eel left the area through the opening in the causeway, taking the most direct route.

The observation lasted over 10 minutes. Darkness did not fall for a further 30 minutes.

I thank Peter Schweigman for his constructive comments.

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