

## SHORT NOTES

### Cattle Egret numbers in New Zealand in 1984

In the three years 1981-1983, the numbers of Cattle Egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*) wintering in New Zealand were, in most localities, well below the previous maximum in 1980 (Heather 1982) and national counts were not made. In April-May 1984, however, it was evident that, especially in the North Island, more were arriving from Australia even than in 1980. A national count was organised for late August, as in the years 1977-1980.

Table 1 gives the results, together with those of the 1980 count for comparison. The New Zealand total was more than double that of 1980, but most of the large increase was in all the North Island regions and in Southland. Numbers were well down in the traditional Canterbury sites for Cattle Egrets.

The overall total is a minimum because the larger flocks are counted conservatively, being hard to count accurately while the birds mill about among

TABLE 1 — Numbers of Cattle Egrets in New Zealand, from counts made in late August 1984; 1980 figures included for comparison

	1980	1984
Northland	91	220
Auckland	18	129
S. Auck/Waikato	157	356
Bay of Plenty/ Volcanic Plateau	0	45
Taranaki/Wanganui	31	72
Gisborne	26	38
Hawke's Bay	4	40
Manawatu/ west Wellington	77	211
Wairarapa	0	15
North Island total	404	1126
Marlborough	32	50
Nelson	55	29
West Coast	25	42
Canterbury	167	59
Otago	55	59
Southland	33	166
South Island total	367	405
New Zealand total	771	1531

cattle and in and out of ditches and low spots on a field. In several districts, notably Far North, Bay of Plenty, Kaikoura and South Canterbury, flocks were smaller than they had been in July and some flocks could not be found at all.

The main features of Cattle Egret movement were the same as in previous years (Heather 1978, 1982): an early influx during April in some western regions, a major influx in May, the return of birds mainly to the same traditional farms, and a piecemeal departure to Australia mainly during November.

Two Australian-banded birds were recovered, both banded as chicks by S. G. Lane on 17 December at Lawrence, New South Wales (29°30', 153°06'). The first was found dead at Waitotara, South Taranaki, on 30 April. The second was found very weak and thin at Te Horo, west Wellington, on 23 April; it was cared for by Peter McKenzie at Nga Manu Sanctuary, where it thrived on a diet of earthworms. It was dyed with picric acid and released in late May; within several days it had found the nearest Cattle Egret flock, north of Lake Horowhenua, Levin, where it remained for the winter (W. R. Jackson, pers. comm.).

In addition, five were found dead during a beach patrol on Ninety Mile Beach, Far North, on 28 April.

Other arrival dates recorded in the Far North were 15 April, 5 birds at Herekino Harbour; 30 April, 11 at Pukepoto; and late April, c.60 at Ahipara. Events elsewhere up to 30 June 1984 are in Howell & Gaze (1985) and from 1 July 1984 in Howell & Gaze (1986). At Grovetown, Blenheim, were 1 on 11/4,

TABLE 2 — Flock movements and changes in number at three neighbouring sites near Kaitaia, Northland

Date	Unahi	Waimarorori	Waiharara
May 2	c.44		
8	33		
9			c.94
19			75
27			78
Jun 5			0
13	11	Present	
24	20	102	
26		120	
Jul 3	126		
Aug 13, 18	80		
Sep 1	80		
30	96		
Oct 21	68	112	
23	29	9	
27		55	
30	c.100		
Nov 9		c.100	
17	0	49	
23	10	0	

13 on 21/4, 27 on 12/5, and 37 on 18/6 (Jenkins and Bonniface *in* Howell & Gaze 1985). In early and mid April, over 120 were known on the West Coast, South Island, but many had gone by early May, especially from South Westland (O'Donnell *et al.* *in* Howell & Gaze 1985). The Te Anau district seems to have been a staging point for some birds passing south of the Southern Alps: at Milford Sound were 16 on 11-20/4, at Te Anau 4 on 14/4, 5 on 16/4, 8 on 21/4, and at Manapouri 3 on 8-10/5; of these, only one stayed on (Morrison *in* Howell & Gaze 1985). A May build-up was recorded at Aka Aka, Waikato: 19 on 3/5, then 46 and later 70, but none by 29/5 (Brown *in* Howell & Gaze 1985). These birds had presumably joined the large Rangiriri flock.

Table 2 shows the events recorded (L. Howell *et al.*, pers. comm.) at and near the traditional Unahi site near Kaitaia, Far North, after the initial arrival records given above. The changing numbers as birds shifted about among three favoured farms, some perhaps passing through after arrival or before departure, illustrate the difficulty of interpreting the counts at some places. Arriving during April and May, the birds established first at Waiharara for about 3 weeks and then moved to Waimarori and Unahi; most left over 3 weeks in November and none overwintered. An account is in preparation (W. R. Jackson & M. Olsen) of several years' events at Lake Horowhenua, where regular observations and lack of birds on passage have made the annual trends clear.

#### REGIONAL RESULTS OF THE AUGUST COUNT

**Northland:** Unahi 80, Ruawai 135, Kokapu (12 km SW of Whangarei) 5.

**Auckland:** Tapora 7, Parakai (Helensville) 101, Orewa 21. The 4-5 birds at Mangere in June-July could not be found.

**South Auckland/Waikato:** Piako (Firth of Thames) 69, Port Waikato 12, Aka Aka 30, Rangiriri 210+, Lake Ngaroto 30, Forest Lake, Hamilton 4, Hautapu 1.

**Bay of Plenty:** Opotiki 15, Awaiti Wetlands Reserve 26.

**Volcanic Plateau:** Lake Aniwhenua (Galatea) 4.

**Taranaki:** Barrett's Lagoon, New Plymouth 32, Nukumarū (Waitotara) 17, Kai-iwi 10, Whangaehu 13. The last three figures were recorded in September by B. D. Heather (Nukumarū) and O. C. Torr, no one being available to count there in August.

**Manawatu/west Wellington:** Lake Horowhenua 82, Foxton (farm south of Foxton + Manawatu Estuary) 80, Woodville 14, Linton 14, Kakariki (at Feltex wool-sour effluent ponds) 4, Flock House area 17 (Forest Rd 11, Raumai Rd 6).

**Gisborne:** Gisborne district 25, Tolaga Bay 1, Awamate, Wairoa, 12.

**Hawke's Bay:** Lake Hatuma (Waipukurau) 8, Swamp Road (Hastings) 14, Maraekakaho 2, Meeanee 6, Dannevirke 10.

**Wairarapa:** Masterton 5, Te Hopai 1, Kumenga 9.

**Nelson:** Appleby 6, Takaka 23.

**Marlborough:** Grovetown (Blenheim) 50. Reports of 14 at Kaikoura not confirmed.

**West Coast:** Karamea 11, Arahura 6, Totara Flat 25.

**Canterbury:** Culverden 1, Kaiapoi district 9, Ashburton 19, Taumutu-Lakeside (Ellesmere) 30. Unconfirmed reports of flocks in Clandebye and Otipua-Adair districts.

**Otago:** Berwick 21, Outram 7, Balclutha 21, Clinton (near Wairuma) 5, Hildethorpe (Oamaru) 5.

**Southland:** Te Anau 1, Croydon 3, Wyndham 54, Centre Hill 1, Hokonui 6, Papatotara 11, Orepuki 1, Waianiwa 12, New River Ferry 24, Makarewa 32, Waimatua 7, Rimu 14.

This report is the result of the co-operative effort of many OSNZ members, most of whom were acknowledged in the OSNZ newsletter of September 1984.

#### LITERATURE CITED

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### Shining Cuckoo carrying an egg

On 3 November 1985, at about 2 p.m., my husband saw a Shining Cuckoo (*Chrysococcyx lucidus*) sitting at 1.2 metres in a eucalypt at the side of our drive. A strong southerly wind was blowing, and the tree was getting very blown about.

When he was within 1 metre of the bird, he was surprised to see that it had an egg in its beak. This egg was off-white, slightly pink, and completely filled the bird's gape. The cuckoo seemed undisturbed by human presence and sat there for about a minute before flying 30 metres to the bush, still carrying the egg. The egg was estimated to be 14 mm in diameter and 19 mm long and was held with the pointed end into the gape.

I am not presuming that the egg was that of the Shining Cuckoo, although the colour and size can be variable (Buller p.81, Oliver p.534). To which species did it belong? It seems to be generally accepted that the hen cuckoo removes an egg from the chosen nest, and this is either dropped some distance away or is eaten.

Why, then, was the bird sitting in a eucalypt in the open with the egg in its beak and, when it flew off towards the bush, where a number of Grey Warblers were nesting, why was it still carrying the egg?

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[Michie (*NZ Bird Notes* 2 (8):196; 1948) reported two cases of Shining Cuckoo in the open carrying an egg, crushing it, swallowing the contents, and dropping the shell. The eggs were of Chaffinch and Grey Warbler. The egg in Mrs Skinner's note matches the description of a Grey Warbler's but could have been of some other passerine; the Shining Cuckoo's, however, is olive-green (Gill 1982, *Notornis* 29(3):219). November is the peak month for laying by Shining Cuckoos (Gill 1982:216). — Ed.]