

Birding Whanganui – e-Newsletter: December 2021–January 2022

This is a somewhat eclectic report of sightings made and photographs taken by various observers locally over the past couple of months, as extracted from e-mails circulated among a smaller group of specific enthusiasts. The items are presented in no particular order.

Waders and other waterbirds on the Whanganui estuary

Paul Gibson, Jim Norris and Lynne Douglas, with occasional inputs from others (*e.g.*, Ormond Torr, Michael O'Shea, Frank Rawlinson) continue to keep an eye on the birds using the Whanganui estuary. Paul and Jim concentrate particularly on the numbers of Bar-tailed Godwits, specifically on the occurrence of any flagged or banded birds, including a flagged male, AJD, now back on the Whanganui estuary for at least his 14th summer. He was first recorded here in late 2008, soon after being caught and banded at the Manawatū estuary on 30th October that year, when he was judged to be least 3 years old. His comings and goings are detailed by Paul in a richly illustrated, recently published book *Feats Beyond Amazing. The Life Story of a Bar-tailed Godwit*. If you haven't bought a copy, but would like to, it is available in some local bookshops (*e.g.*, Paige's, corner of Guyton and Wicksteed streets). Alternatively, you can try contacting Shirley McDonough (14meplez@gmail.com) who may still have some copies, bought originally for sale at the River Traders Market.

As mentioned in the last newsletter, AJD returned to the Whanganui estuary on 30 October 2021. From his appearance and behaviour, he had obviously just arrived direct from Alaska, whereas in previous years he had always gone first to Foxton before relocating to Whanganui some weeks later. This season, he has apparently stayed on the Whanganui estuary throughout, having been seen by Paul and Jim every time they've looked for him. The number of godwits present on the estuary this summer has been somewhat higher than in recent years, with an average of just over 19 birds being recorded (minimum, 14; maximum 28). Among these is a second flagged male godwit, YRM, first seen by Jim and Paul on 10 December, and now also apparently 'resident' on the estuary. He is a 2-year-old bird, banded by Phil Battley and colleagues on the Manawatū estuary on 3 December. He is noticeably paler than AJD and, unfortunately, currently has an injured left leg (the non-flagged leg), causing him to depend on his good leg most of the time, even when feeding, when he hops around.



Two flagged male Bar-tailed Godwits (AJD, left; YRM, right) and an unbanded female (centre)
(photo: Paul Gibson)

Other notable sightings and numbers include up to 47 **Pied Stilts** (recorded in early January); 2–6 **South Island Pied Oystercatcher**; small numbers of **Wrybill** (maximum 6: details of when and where a colour-banded bird, seen on New Year's Day, was banded, have been sought from the Banding Office at DOC); 2 apparent juvenile **Banded Dotterel** on the estuary in early January; 1–7 **Caspian Terns**, including several banded birds, one with the colour-band combination *metal* [left leg], *green* above *pale blue* [right leg]), and another with an engraved alpha-numeric band on its right leg (not readable); and a recent build-up of **White-fronted Terns**, including recently fledged juveniles being fed by adults, first reported by Lynne Douglas on 20 January, when 200–300 birds were present at the Wharf Street boat ramp (up from 72 the day before), peaking at around 500 birds a week later.



Adult White-fronted Tern flying in with what appears to be a jack mackerel fingerling, to be fed to the bird's offspring on the boat ramp at Wharf St (photo by Lynne Douglas)

In mid-December, while looking for godwits and anything else interesting to photograph on the estuary, and despite high wind and driving rain at the time (!), Jim Norris saw and photographed a white bird with a buff-coloured head and neck, perched on the derelict Affco-Imlay wharf piles alongside 9 **Royal Spoonbills** and 4 **Black Shags**. It turned out to be a **Cattle Egret** in full breeding plumage, the latest calendar date that species this has been recorded in our region.

Cattle Egrets breed colonially across northern, eastern and south-eastern Australia, having first being recorded there in 1948. Birds nesting in Queensland and New South Wales are known to migrate in southerly and south-easterly directions after breeding to Victoria, Tasmania and New Zealand, where the species was first recorded in 1963. The pattern of arrival and departure in New Zealand is quite clear: most birds arrive from Australia in May and depart in late-October – November. Some birds stay over, apparently including birds in breeding plumage but, to date, breeding has not been confirmed (or even suspected). But with species such as Royal Spoonbill and, more recently, Glossy Ibis, having established breeding populations in New Zealand, it surely cannot be too long before Cattle Egret do the same, provided that suitable habitat can be found (relatively undisturbed wetlands with flooded trees and bushes).



Royal Spoonbill (R), a Black Shag (centre) and an adult Cattle Egret in full breeding plumage (centre left) on the derelict Affco Imlay wharf photographed in driving rain by Jim Norris, 16 December 2021

Royal Spoonbill is another frequently occurring species on the estuary. Over the past two months, the numbers recorded on the lower estuary, below Affco-Imlay, have ranged from 2 to 9 (average: 5 birds). Frank Rawlinson, who often kayaks down the Whanganui River to the mole, reports seeing birds regularly at two localities: the derelict Affco-Imlay wharf (consistently 4–5 birds, in line with the reports from other people); and on an old pine tree at the northern tip of Corliss Island, where 5–9 birds are usually seen. He also reports 1–2 birds near the mouth of the Mateongaonga Stream, opposite Aramoho, a site that Jim Norris has also been keeping an eye on, no doubt hoping that the birds may one day breed there or nearby. The birds on Corliss Island would also be worth watching closely for any sign that they might start breeding.



Five Royal Spoonbill roosting in an old pine tree at the northern tip of Corliss Island (photo: Frank Rawlinson)

Spring survey of local estuaries for Birds New Zealand's National Wader Count Scheme

On 4 December, Paul Gibson and Jim Norris carried out surveys of the Waitōtara, Whanganui, Whangaehu and Turakina estuaries, and Koitiata Lagoon, adjacent to the Turakina estuary. Highlights included 28 **Bar-tailed Godwit** on the Whanganui estuary, compared with 3 at Koitiata and 2 at Whangaehu and none at Waitōtara; 15 **Banded Dotterel** at Koitiata, but none elsewhere; 6 **Black-fronted Dotterel** at Koitiata and 1 at Whangaehu (both localities where the species can quite regularly be seen; none elsewhere); and, best of all, 2 **Ruddy Turnstones** at Koitiata, a rare species both for this locality and in the region generally.



Ruddy Turnstone photographed at Koitiata Lagoon (photo by Paul Gibson)



Black-fronted Dotterel at Koitiata Lagoon (photo by Paul Gibson)

On 20 December, the same intrepid duo went out on a hot and extremely windy day to visit the Whanganui estuary, Koitiata Lagoon and the Rangitikei estuary at Tangimoana. Jim wrote:

Whanganui estuary:

We checked the local estuary at Beach Road before leaving Whanganui. It was near full tide, very windy and we found 15 godwits, including both the birds flagged AJD and YRM respectively. Others included 3 Variable Oystercatchers, 10 Pied Stilts, 30 Black-backed Gulls and 5 Spur-winged Plover. A Pied Shag flew up the river from the direction of the river mouth and roosting on the remnants of the old Imlay Wharf were 2 Black Shags and 8 Royal Spoonbills.



Whanganui River Estuary - 20 December 2021

Variable Oystercatcher (photo: Paul Gibson)

Koitiata Lagoon, Turakina:

We saw 5 Pied Stilts, 1 Black-backed Gull in flight, 5 Banded Dotterels and 3 Black-fronted Dotterels. One of the Black-fronted Dotterels flew up from a likely nest site. We had a quick look but didn't come across the nest. The tide was still quite full and we were unable to get close to the far end of the lagoon.

Rangitikei River Estuary at Tangimoana:

By the time we arrived at Tangimoana at 1.00pm, the westerly wind, full with sand, was blowing briskly and it wasn't pleasant for either us or any birds that might have been about the estuary. We had a look at the river opposite Scott's Ferry and found a single Pied Shag swimming in the river. Following a quick lunch, we checked out two tidal arms of the estuary, finding no birds at all. At the estuary proper the sharp wind made viewing across the estuary difficult and any waders that may have been there, appeared to be well hunkered down and out of our sight.

Paul and Jim then went to a local wetland where Paul had seen a bittern in 2007. They didn't find any bittern but, in the wetland, there were 2 Black Shags, 2 Royal Spoonbills, 1 White-faced Heron, 6 Spur-winged Plover, 12 Black Swan, 1 Pukeko and a pair of Welcome Swallow hawking over the water.



Estuary at Tangimoana - 20 December 2021

A view of the Rangitikei estuary at Tangimoana (photo: Paul Gibson)

Bird-viewing hide now up at Koitiata Lagoon

Jo Anson, chair of the Koitiata Wetlands Restoration Project, reports that volunteers from the local community, with funding support from both the Four Regions Charitable Trust (formerly the Powerco Wanganui Trust) and the Koitiata Residents Committee, have built a bird-viewing hide overlooking Koitiata Lagoon. This should provide a great opportunity to view, photograph or sketch birds on the lagoon while being sheltered from both the sun and the wind.



The newly erected bird-viewing hide at Koitiata Lagoon (photo by Jo Anson)

If you do go out to Koitiata, consider recording which species you see and their numbers, ideally for eBird (<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/home>) but at least for the Koitiata Wetlands Restoration Project. A brief email to Jo (joanson1727@gmail.com), listing when you were there, for how long, and what

you saw (numbers included, if possible), would be much appreciated. If you copied me (birds.wanganui@xtra.co.nz) into the email, I'd be able to keep track of these sightings as well, enabling me to provide a regular summary in future newsletters.

Australasian Bittern at Koitiata

Over the years, there have been several reports of Australasian Bittern from the swampland lying just inland of Koitiata Lagoon, ideal habitat for the species. But these reports have always been anecdotal, received second or third hand, and usually of birds heard calling (a deep—*i.e.*, low frequency—resonating sound, like someone blowing across the top of a beer bottle). Until recently, the only reliable record on eBird for Koitiata was of a bird seen flying away from the observer, Cleland Wallace (Massey University), on 10 August 2019. Cleland is currently the top contributor to the New Zealand Bird Atlas.

Some weeks ago, Maria Sainsbury of Koitiata was out walking her dog in the pine forest just south-east of the township and came across a Bittern in a small pond in the forest. Being caught out in the open like that, it adopted its “I’m a reed” freeze posture, allowing Maria an opportunity to photograph the bird and later identify it.



Australasian Bittern adopting a characteristic ‘freeze’ posture when caught out in the open on a small forest pond at Koitiata (photo: Maria Sainsbury)

The Australasian Bittern is a critically endangered species, not only in New Zealand, where there are probably fewer than 600 mature birds, but also globally. As its name implies, the Australasian Bittern also occurs in Australia, where it is declining—there are thought to be fewer than 1000 mature individuals left—and in New Caledonia, where there are around only 50 birds.

The main threat to the species is the degradation and destruction of wetlands, both in total wetland area and in the resources there that are needed for survival: food (eels, other fish, frogs, freshwater crayfish); and tall cover, to shield the birds from disturbance. Today, the population is highly fragmented. We know from radio-tracking studies carried out in Hawkes Bay that individuals move around extensively during the non-breeding season, presumably in search of suitable habitat (safe from predators and disturbance; food-rich, especially at a time of year when biological productivity may be limited by low temperatures). These movements can result in individuals being recorded more than once during surveys, leading us to overestimate the size of the population. If you visit Koitiata, please keep eyes and ears open for any sign of this species. The wetlands of the Manawatū-Whanganui dune country were probably one of the strongholds of this species, and may still be, even with reduced numbers.

Pied Shags nesting at Putiki

On 1 December, Ormond Torr checked the Pied Shag colony at Putiki and found four nests, all with well-grown young. This is one more nest than was recorded last season (if my memory serves me correctly).



Pied Shag nest with an adult and at least three well-grown chicks in a poplar at Putiki, adjacent to the Whanganui River (photo: Ormond Torr)

Peter Frost looked at the colony from the other side of the river on 20 December and also saw four nests with large young, most at the wing-flapping stage, being fed by adults coming and going from the river, both up and downstream. During the 2020/21 breeding season, it seemed that at least some of the pairs bred three times, apparently successfully, so it will be interesting to keep a regular eye on this colony to see how many times the birds breed this season. Perhaps we need a general photograph of the current distribution of the nests, so that we can number them and circulate it among ourselves, allowing the use and fate of each nest to be recorded more precisely.

Pied Shag is now well established on the Whanganui River, with regular sightings of birds reported from the estuary (Jim Norris) and near the mouth (Lynne Douglas). The birds seem to forage both along the river and at the river mouth.

Morepork at Westmere

On 16 January, Paul Gibson found a Morepork perched on the same branch where he and others saw and photographed four Morepork on Christmas Day, 2020. Some of you may have received this 'Christmas Card' from him at the time (his January 2022 photograph is shown below, for comparison).



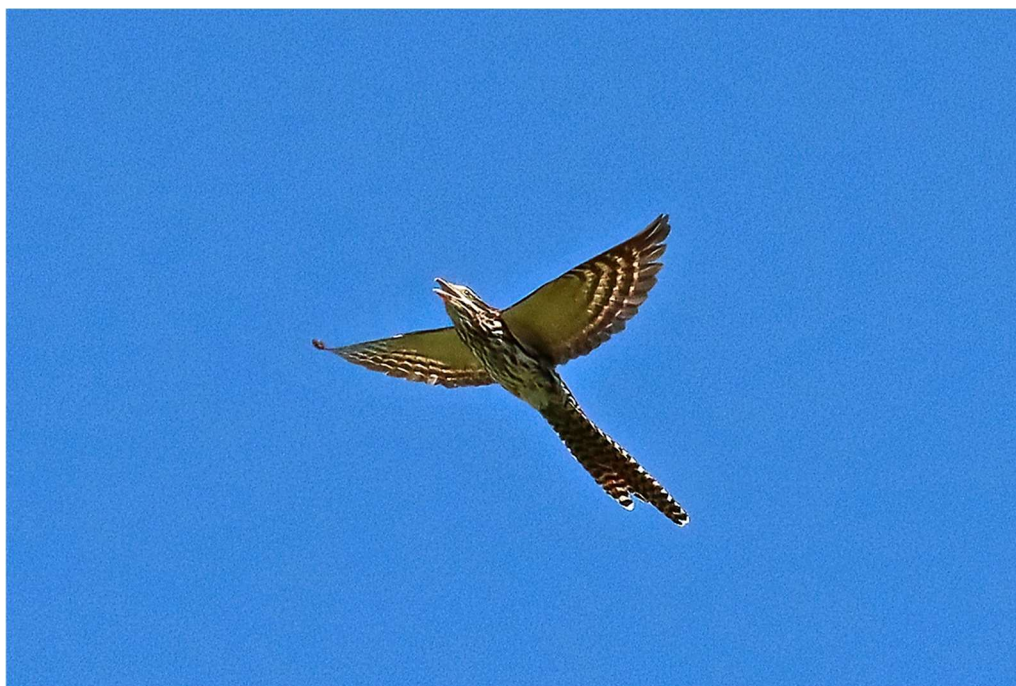
Top: Morepork family (3 juveniles and one adult, on right), photographed on Christmas Day, 2020
Bottom: Adult Morepork, perched on the same branch, 16 January 2022 (both photos: Paul Gibson)

You can see clearly that the same perch is being used as in December 2020. As Paul says, "*Creatures of habit, like the godwit.*" The light in this forested part of the Westmere reserve is very dim, so a very slow shutter speed was required to photograph the bird. Paul's crystal-clear photograph is testament to the quality of his camera (which costs more than my car 😊).

Long-tailed Cuckoo at Waitahinga

On 22 January, Paul Gibson and Peter Frost went up to Waitahinga Forest, specifically to look for Long-tailed Cuckoo, followed by Jim and Linda Norris just over a week later. Waitahinga is one place where one can be virtually certain of finding this species in summer, if not always seeing them then almost certainly hearing them. The earliest record we have is 12 October (2019, one heard by Peter Frost), and the latest is 7 February (2021, when at least two birds were recorded). Long-tailed Cuckoos respond readily to playbacks of their calls, vocalising in return, which tends then to stimulate others to begin calling. Using this technique, we have noted up to ~10 birds, seen and heard, on several occasions in mid- to late-January and early February. (This is based on the number of birds seen flying one way across the valley down which Junction Road runs, plus the number remaining and still calling from clearly separate locations in the forest on the northern side.)

The visit on 22 January was no different to earlier occasions, with five birds seen in the air at one time, while 2-4 birds were still calling from the forest below them. This provided brief but rewarding opportunities to photograph the birds in flight. Jim and Linda saw four birds fly across the valley and over the car park but unfortunately did not manage to get any photographs. (Long-tailed Cuckoos fly remarkably quickly and are often not seen at first when flying out from the forest.)



Long-tailed Cuckoo in flight at Waitahinga, 22 January 2022 (photo: Peter Frost)

It is not clear if the number of birds recorded here in late summer reflects the number present in this and surrounding forests generally (including any juveniles reared by the cuckoo's host that year), or if this is a gathering of birds ahead of their departure for islands in the south-west Pacific. Certainly, the forest here and elsewhere along the Whanganui-Waitōtara watershed support apparently healthy populations of Whitehead or pōpokatea, the cuckoo's only host in this region, but the numbers of birds we've recorded together at Waitahinga is more suggestive of a pre-migration gathering. Some bird species do migrate together in groups (often colonial-breeding species), and so must presumably gather before departure, but there is no evidence for this in cuckoos, although such proof would be hard to come by short of placing satellite-tracking tags concurrently on several individuals in an area. As Albert Einstein is reputed to have once said, "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence."

Grey Warblers feeding a Shining Cuckoo chick

On 26 December, Peter Frost heard incessant, high-pitched 'siip-siip-siip-siip...' calls in his garden in Whanganui East. He traced it to a young Shining Cuckoo being fed energetically by a pair of Grey Warblers, half the size of the cuckoo. The two hapless warblers were foraging for small insects in the surrounding trees, returning to feed the seemingly insatiable chick every couple of minutes.

One of the mysteries is how cuckoos learn their adult calls, given that they never interact with adult cuckoos before their first breeding season. Giving and responding to their own calls must be coded genetically, whereas recognition of their Grey Warbler hosts, by sight and through their calls, is presumably entrained during the fledging period.



Shining Cuckoo chick being fed by an adult Grey Warbler (photo: Peter Frost)

Other observations

Jono Gribble reports that the **Fernbirds** on his Tokomaru Rd East property appear to have had a good breeding season, with birds calling up and down the valley with its stream and wetlands, as well as in the adjacent young pines. **Whiteheads** have also been calling regularly from the mature pine forest above the valley. These are presumably small family groups, with the birds keeping contact with each other as they spread through the canopy foraging.

In contrast to these two species, Jono has not heard **Spotless Crake** recently, although at least a couple of pairs of birds were present, calling, at the start of the breeding season. Many bird species enter a refractory phase after breeding, one where they are quiet and do not respond to stimuli such as playbacks of their calls. This could be so as not to draw attention to themselves and any dependent offspring. Many birds also undergo their post-breeding feather moult around this time. In both cases, keeping quiet may be important in reducing the risk of predation.

On 22 January, Russell Cannings and a couple of other Waikato birders between them heard and saw at least three **Nankeen Night-heron** on the Makirikiri Stream behind the café at Upokongaro, so it might be worth following this up to see if there are any of this season's young present.

Peter Frost, Science Support Service, Whanganui (email: birds.wanganui@xtra.co.nz)