

Birds Whanganui  
e-Newsletter February–March 2022



Black-fronted Dotterel *Eseyornis melanops*

(photo: Peter Frost)

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**Birds New Zealand** (Ornithological Society of New Zealand Inc.)

**Kāhui Mātai Manu o Aotearoa**

Wanganui Region “fostering the study and enjoyment of birds”

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<http://www.birdsnz.org.nz/>

## About this newsletter

This newsletter covers observations of birds recorded during February and March 2022, mostly in Birds New Zealand's Whanganui Region. The region is bounded by the Rangitikei and Waitōtara rivers in the east and west respectively and extends inland across most of the Whanganui, Whangaehu and Turakina river catchments. A few enthusiasts made trips outside the region to observe unusual species or explore some seldom-visited areas. These are also covered in this report, along with some reflections on various points of interest.

## Waders of the Whanganui R and other estuaries

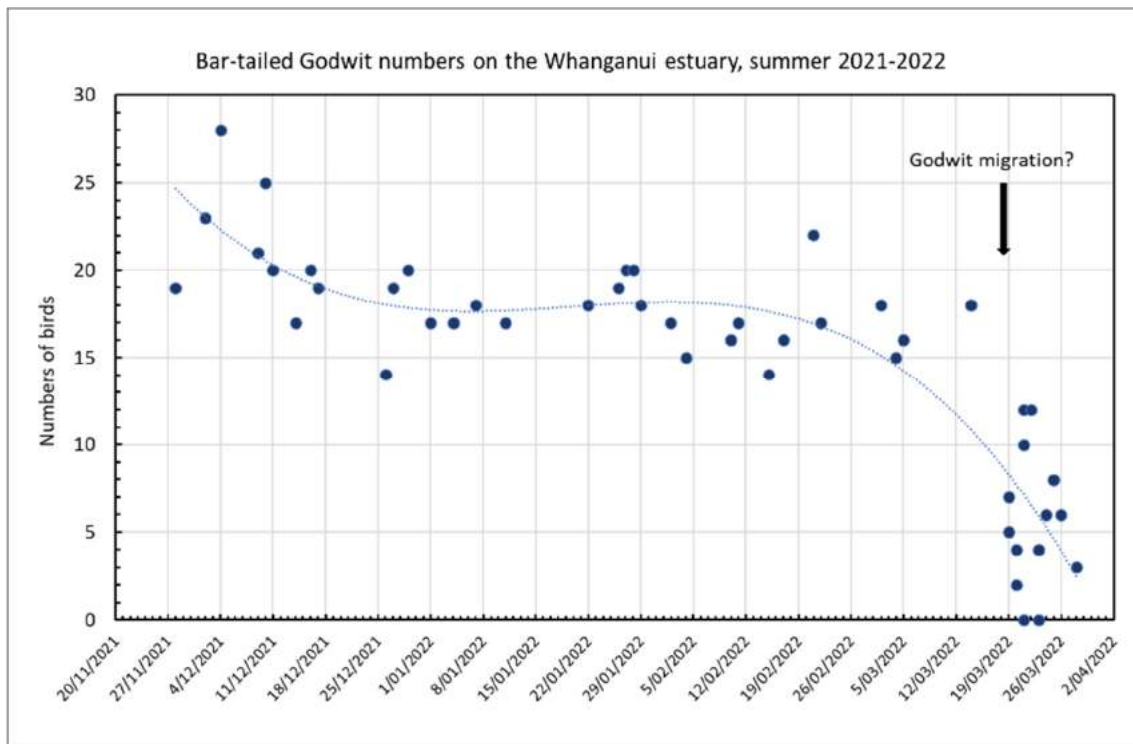
Paul Gibson and Jim Norris spent many hours over summer, monitoring and photographing Bar-tailed Godwits and other waders occurring on the Whanganui estuary. Much of their interest focused on the presence of 'AJD', a flagged male returning from the northern hemisphere to Whanganui for at least the 14<sup>th</sup> consecutive season. As previously reported, his arrival this year was different. Rather than fly first to the Manawatū estuary, and then move across to Whanganui at the start of summer, he flew direct to Whanganui estuary, arriving on 30 October 2021. Godwits migrating south from Alaska last year appear to have faced strong headwinds, forcing some birds to take longer routes. This may have accounted for AJD's late arrival. The details are documented by Paul in his book *Feats Beyond Amazing. The Life Story of a Bar-tailed Godwit*. Visit <https://www.upics.co.nz/> for information on how to obtain a copy of the book, if you don't have one already. The following photographs (Fig. 1) show how his plumage changed from his arrival to just before his departure.



**Fig 1.** Two views of Bar-tailed Godwit 'AJD': left, on arrival on the Whanganui estuary, 30 October 2021, already having moulted out of his breeding plumage; right, on 14 March, a few days before he disappeared, presumably having left early for the northern hemisphere (photos by Paul Gibson)

One thing that Paul looked to do this season was to document AJD's change in plumage, from the subdued non-breeding plumage, acquired before he left Alaska (see Fig. 1 left), into his full breeding plumage, which he develops here before migrating north (Fig. 1 right). The first hints of breeding plumage were recorded in the second half of January and it was fully developed by mid-March, just before AJD was due to migrate. Moulting is a nutritionally and energetically demanding process, so to do this at the same time that the bird is fattening up prior to migration must mean having access to a relatively abundant and reliable food source. The Whanganui estuary would seem to provide that, at least for some individuals.

In previous years, AJD has left on or about 25 March. According to Phil Battley (Massey University), New Zealand’s leading godwit researcher, this late departure date, together with the deep brick-red breeding plumage, suggests that AJD breeds on the north slope of the Brooks Range in Alaska. This year, however, AJD disappeared early, being last seen by Paul on 18 March; he was not present on 19 March. At the time, Paul thought that AJD had moved across to the Manawatū estuary at Foxton and would depart from there, something that he had done previously on a few occasions, the last being in March 2019. Paul contacted David Melville, a renowned ornithologist from Nelson who has been monitoring godwit departures from the Manawatū in place of Jesse Conklin, one of Phil’s collaborators. (Jesse is based in the Netherlands and has been unable to travel to New Zealand for the past two years because of COVID 19-related restrictions on international travel to New Zealand.) David did not find AJD but noted that there had been a wave of godwit departures from Foxton on 18 and 19 March. Around this time, numbers on the Whanganui estuary declined from an average of around 17 birds in the weeks before 14 March to about 4 the week after (Fig. 2). Jesse, who has been processing the data collected by David, said in an email to Paul that godwit departures this year have been the earliest ever recorded.



**Fig. 2.** Numbers of Bar-tailed Godwits counted on the Whanganui River over summer, 2021–2022. The fitted line is a 3<sup>rd</sup>-order polynomial regression. The sharp drop-off in the number of birds recorded on the estuary following 18–19 March, when godwits elsewhere seemed to migrate, is marked.

Depending on where they breed in Alaska, godwits appear to time their departure so as to eventually arrive on their breeding grounds as soon after the thaw as possible. The thaw occurs when ground-level temperatures rise sufficiently to melt the overlying snow and ice, triggering a pulse of biological productivity. This includes mass emergences of midges and mosquitos, and subsequently their larvae, on which godwits and other waders feed. Arriving on time presumably allows birds to take full advantage of this short-lived abundance of food.

Could the early departures be a response to wider changes occurring in the Arctic, linked to global warming, particularly changes in the timing of the thaw? The Arctic is warming more than twice as fast as the rest of the planet, with recent surface air temperatures at least 1°C above the long-term average. The period October 2020–September 2021 was the 7<sup>th</sup> warmest on record (see <https://www.arctic.noaa.gov/Report-Card/Report-Card-2021>).

One compelling proxy data set suggesting that the thaw may be occurring earlier is the timing of river-ice breakup on three Alaskan rivers: the Yukon, measured at Dawson City in the Yukon, Canada; the Tanana, measured at Nenana, Alaska; and the Kuskokwim, measured at Bethel, Alaska. Compared with the 10-year period 1961–1970, river-ice has broken up on average just under 11 days earlier in the period 2011–2020 (ranging from 9 days earlier at Dawson City and Nenana, in the cold interior, to 14 days earlier at Bethel, near the coast). Source: [https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2021-03/river-ice\\_fig-1.csv](https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2021-03/river-ice_fig-1.csv)

Could the godwits be responding in some way to these changes? Changes in phenology—for birds, the timing of events such as migration, breeding and moulting—are increasingly being seen in a range of bird species (though not all). It is not clear if these changes are the result of selection (early breeders being more successful and leaving more young than late breeders), or if there is sufficient plasticity in the birds' responses to their environment—perhaps through external influences on how those genes that regulate phenology are expressed—allowing them to track environmental change by shifting the time of their activities to match the change.

For much of summer, AJD was accompanied by a second flagged bird, YRM, a 2-year-old male banded at Foxton on 3 December 2021. According to Phil, he is unlikely to migrate this year. Indeed, he remained on the Whanganui estuary for days after the others had migrated. He did not develop a breeding male's reddish plumage, instead showing only a few pale red feathers in his otherwise strikingly pale-grey plumage (Fig. 3). When he does start to migrate, perhaps in March 2023, will he have anything like the longevity of AJD, and will Whanganui remain his preferred southern summer home?



**Fig 3.** Male Bar-tailed Godwit YRM photographed after most other godwits had migrated, showing only limited red colouration in his plumage (photo: Paul Gibson).



Figure 2, shown earlier, illustrates another point: the numbers of godwits fluctuate, even just days apart. Some of the variation in numbers could be due to the observers not seeing all the birds, especially if some choose to forage elsewhere on the estuary than that being surveyed. But many of these counts were made near high tide, when the birds come together to roost. One indication that some of this fluctuation in numbers is due to birds moving between estuaries in the region (and perhaps a few even more widely) comes from sightings of another marked bird, YRE. This bird, a female, was first seen by Paul on 21 March, after most of the godwits appear to have migrated. David Melville notes that she was at Foxton Beach on 28 February, when he first arrived. There were days subsequently when she was not recorded: either she was simply not seen, or she wasn't present. David recorded her as being present on 18 March, and then again on 26 March, after her visit to the Whanganui estuary, where she was photographed on 21 and 22 March. Paul noted that she also carries a transmitter, so presumably someone somewhere is tracking her movements. No doubt we'll find out more about her and her movements in due course.

With AJD having departed early, a field trip that Paul Gibson had planned for people to join him to celebrate AJD's departure on his usual departure date, 25 March, looked to be in jeopardy. Nevertheless, Paul decided that it could go ahead, at least so people could see the remaining godwits and any other species of interest. In all, 18 people turned up. As Paul wrote "Despite the howling southerly all got down to the river edge and close to the remaining eight godwits, so that was good." Afterwards the group moved to the shelter of the Powerco building (Fig. 4), where Paul gave out prints of AJD, taken the week before. His book on this bird has clearly stimulated a lot of interest in it and in godwits generally.

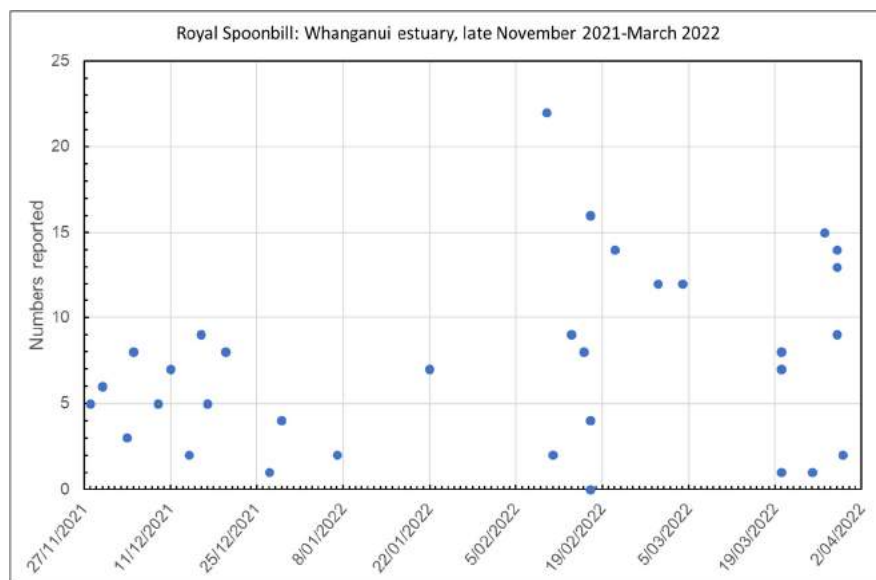


**Fig. 4.** Some of the people who turned out on 25 March hoping to see 'our' Bar-tailed Godwit, 'AJD', leave on the northerly leg of his annual migration. Unfortunately, he had departed a week early. Nevertheless, they enjoyed seeing other godwits despite the cold southerly wind.

It isn't just godwits that are moving around. On 2 March, Paul photographed a Red (Lesser) Knot accompanying 18 godwits. This bird was only briefly present, and so was presumably moving through, but perhaps not on migration as it was still in its non-breeding plumage. It is likely to remain in New Zealand this winter until it is mature and is ready to breed.

## Royal Spoonbill

As you will have seen from the previous newsletter, the numbers and movements of Royal Spoonbill on the Whanganui estuary is a topic that continues to engage several observers. That interest continues, with several people reporting the numbers of birds that they've seen at various locations extending from the Whanganui Port (Wharf Street) to the northern tip of Corliss Island. (There are also a few reports of individual birds being seen further upstream.) Figure 5 shows the reported numbers, taken from various emails and a few additional numbers reported to the NZ Bird Atlas portal on eBird.



**Fig. 5.** Numbers of Royal Spoonbill on the Whanganui estuary reported on various dates between late November 2021 and the end of March 2022 by several observers: Jim Norris, Paul Gibson, Bill Fleury, Francois Rawlinson, Lynne Douglas, Michael O'Shea and Peter Frost.

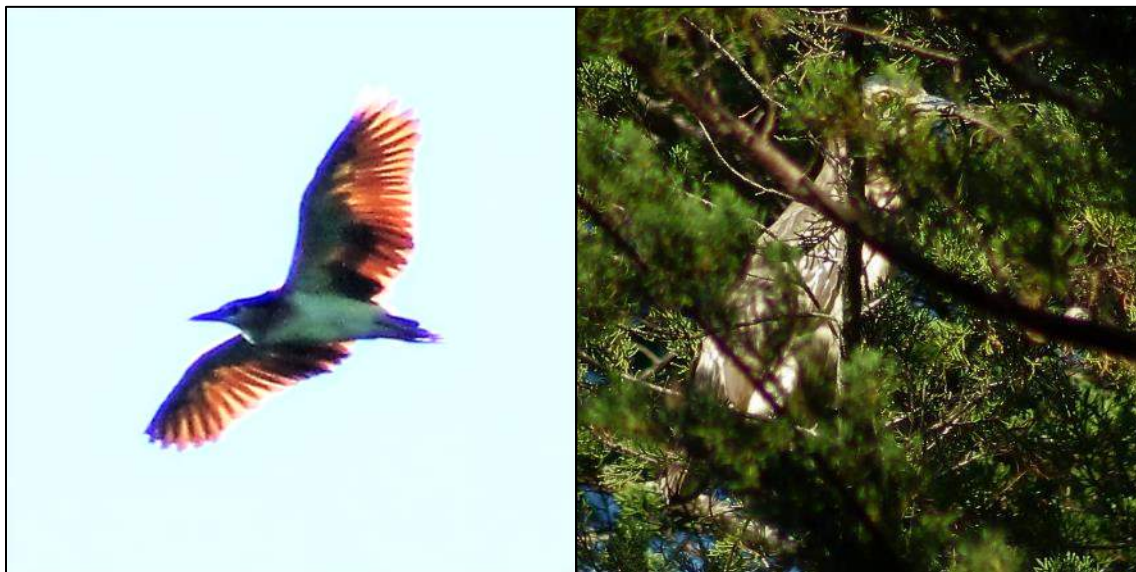
These data illustrate a number of points. First, the numbers are highly variable even within a day or two. This could be because birds are moving in and out of the Whanganui estuary, either circulating among local estuaries or, given the time year, moving to wintering grounds on the larger estuaries and harbours further north. But it could also be because we often only visit parts of the estuary, so if some of the birds are elsewhere, they could be overlooked. Jim Norris showed this when, on 17 February, he surveyed all the likely locations from the Matemateonga Stream, opposite Aramoho, to Wharf Street, at the Whanganui Port. Overall, he saw 20 spoonbill, 16 on Corliss Island and 4 roosting on a stranded log off from the Whanganui Sailing Club. There were none elsewhere, including the derelict Affco-Imlay wharf, a favourite roost site. An hour later, Paul Gibson visited Wharf Street and found four roosting on the rock wall there (quite probably the same four seen by Jim just over an hour earlier at the Whanganui Sailing Club). He then photographed at least 17 birds on the northern tip of Corliss Island. Visiting only one of these sites would likely produce a misleading count.

Second, despite the fluctuating numbers, there seems to be an overall increase from mid-February onwards. This perhaps reflects an initial wave of birds migrating north from their southern breeding colonies. (Numbers have continued to increase into April, when some large flocks were seen on the move. This will be described more fully in the next newsletter.)

### **Trip up the Whanganui River**

On 7 March, Bill Fleury, Jim Norris, David Melville and Peter Frost travelled from Upokongaro to Pipiriki and back by jetboat, expertly guided by Josh Penn (Ridgeline Forestry & Farm Ltd). The main aim of the trip was to look for Nankeen Night-heron along the banks of the Whanganui River, covering much of the species' generally accepted range as a resident in New Zealand. A secondary objective was to survey the shingle banks along the river for Black-fronted Dotterel, a species that seems to have been spreading westwards from the Hawkes Bay, where it is well established. It is a self-introduced species from Australia that settled in NZ in the early 1950s, being recorded initially from the Hawke's Bay (1954, where the first nest was found in 1962), the Manawatū (1955) and North Canterbury (1956). In recent years it has become common at Koitiata Lagoon, near the mouth of the Turakina River; on nearby wetlands; and on the Whangaehu estuary. Ormond Torr photographed three birds on the small wetland near the western end of the airport in June–August 2018. So, we hoped to find out if the species has extended its range further, onto the Whanganui River proper.

Other than two birds disturbed earlier during a short stopover at the known Nankeen Night-heron roost site at Kemp's Pole and a single bird seen by Bill, flying into trees near Parakino, no night-herons were flushed along the river. At least 5 birds were seen at Kemp's Pole, but these only became apparent once we landed and started searching the area. Our consensus was that there were 5 birds overall at Kemp's Pole, 4 adults and a 2<sup>nd</sup>-year bird (determined from a photograph taken by Jim). Three flew across the Whanganui R before returning to the relative security of conifers (Fig. 6). Two of these flushed again as we left.



**Fig. 6.** Nankeen Night-herons seen at Kemp's Pole during the river trip: (left) an adult, showing some moult in its wing coverts, flying across the Whanganui R; (right) a 2<sup>nd</sup>-year bird perched inside a pine tree (photos: Jim Norris).



Experience with heron species in other parts of the world suggested that a boat-based survey might be a useful way of surveying a long stretch of river relatively quickly, especially one like the Whanganui River, where access to the river itself is limited in places. Unfortunately, this proved not to be the case with the Nankeen Night-heron. They do not flush easily, preferring to sidle away quietly if seen, otherwise remaining still and relying on the dense cover of their roost trees to shield them from being seen. This was exemplified on this trip by our experience at Pitangi, where night-herons are known to roost in a prominent kahikatea on the farm there. Despite us knowing this, and searching carefully from the slowly moving boat, no birds were seen. A phone call later to the landowners established that at least one bird had been there and had left the roost that evening, with others heard nearby. Peter Frost visited the site a couple of days later, finding one bird present (Fig. 7). Even then, it proved wary and hard to see, moving out of sight in the tree as soon as it became aware it was being watched.



**Fig. 7.** Nankeen Night-heron at Pitangi Farm: (left) showing its wary nature (photo: Peter Frost); (right) a mature adult at the same site in a more relaxed pose, showing its two head plumes and moulting body feathers (photo: Julie Thurlow).

We were only marginally more successful with our other target species, the Black-fronted Dotterel. Again, we expected that birds would flush ahead of the approaching jet boat. Black-fronted Dotterel, with their dark flight feathers and dark chestnut scapular feathers, are distinctive in flight, and so should be relatively easy to see when flushed. But the only birds seen were two that took flight briefly as the jet boat went by. Fortunately, they were seen by Bill Fleury, who was looking to the side, while most of the rest of us were looking ahead. We circled around and went back slowly, past where the birds were seen—nothing! Fortunately, Jim Norris decided to photograph the shingle bank, taking 36 photographs of the bed of stones. When going through these photos that evening, Jim found one Black-fronted Dotterel standing motionless as the boat went by, thereby confirming Bill’s original identification (Fig. 8). Peter Frost went back to the site a couple of days later and, looking down on to the shingle bank from the road high on the opposite side of the river, found the two dotterels. Assuming this pair are resident, it means that Black-fronted Dotterel have now extended their range as far as the Whanganui R system. Where will they be seen next?





**Fig. 8.** Black-fronted Dotterel on the Whanganui R downstream from Pungarehu (photos: Jim Norris (left); Peter Frost (right)).

Although the river trip might have seemed less productive than we had hoped, there were some other highlights. A total of 22 checklists were filled in for the New Zealand Bird Atlas project across eight Atlas squares (23 checklists if one includes an additional one at the end, to look for the Nankeen Night-herons on the Upokongaro Stream, behind the café). Over 1360 individuals of 28 species were observed, although because this was a 2-way trip, some of the birds counted on the way back would have been among those seen on the way up to Pipiriki. Just concentrating on the numbers seen on the outward leg of the journey, the most numerous species on the river was Mallard (345 individuals, although there were almost certainly some Mallard x Grey Duck hybrids among these—birds showing distinct creamy-white faces, strong facial stripes, and with little or no obvious white lines in front of or behind the speculum—and some may even have been Grey Ducks). The next most abundant species was feral Greylag Goose (202 individuals, including one flock of 91), Welcome Swallow (111, but almost certainly an undercount), Paradise Shelduck (67) and Canada Goose (34). Other notable numbers were 26 Little Shag, 9 Black Shag, 21 Indian Peafowl, 17 Spurwing Plover, 15 Southern Black-backed Gull (occurring right up to Pikiriki) and 13 Pied Stilt.

### **Nankeen Night-heron at Upokongaro**

The Behind-the-Door-on-4 café at Upokongaro continues to be the best place to see Nankeen Night-heron. It is the place to direct any visitors who would like to see the species. Not only are the chances of seeing the birds higher there than anywhere else, particularly in winter, when many of the trees along the Upokongaro Stream behind the café have shed their leaves, but also because people provide the café with custom, and so engender some goodwill towards the night-herons that attract people.

Jim Norris continues to be the person locally who monitors the number and demographic makeup of the birds, but others also contribute. Russell Cannings and two other Waikato birders recorded at least 2 birds leave the roost area at dusk on 22 January. Then, towards the end of February, Phil Thomsen circulated a photograph taken on a mobile phone which showed an undoubted juvenile bird—pale brown and streaked. The following day, Jim Norris went to the café and surrounding area and initially saw and heard 5 birds, 2 adults in the gum tree below the Goose’s Roost, and 2 adults and a begging juvenile in the Holm Oak above the old carport in the café grounds. Later that evening, about 20–30 minutes after sunset, he recorded 7 birds leaving the area, 6 flying down the Whanganui R and 1 flying up the

Upokongaro Stream. One bird returned from the river to the Holm Oak a short while later. Could it be that this bird was still feeding a young bird that was not yet fully fledged?

Subsequent sightings of Nankeen Night-herons at Upokongaro almost certainly refer to some of the same birds: 3 birds on 2 March (Peter Frost, Colin Ogle and Scotty Moore); possibly 5 birds—3 adults photographed and possibly 2 others heard (Paul Gibson); 4 birds, either 3 adults or 2 adults and a sub-adult, and a 2<sup>nd</sup>-year bird on 7 March, following the jet boat trip to Pipiriki and back (Bill Fleury, David Melville and Peter Frost: Fig. 9); 4 birds, one of which was a 2<sup>nd</sup>-year bird, on 9 March (Peter Frost); 5 birds—3 seen and 2 others heard—on 20 March (Jim Norris); and 1 bird being very active in the trees behind the café on 29 March (Francois Rawlinson). Clearly, one currently has a better than even chance of seeing Nankeen Night-herons at Upokongaro. Be patient and listen for birds' calls (a deep croaking 'quark').



**Fig. 9.** An adult Nankeen Night-heron (left), and a 2<sup>nd</sup>-year bird presumably moulting into its 3<sup>rd</sup>-year plumage, photographed below the café at Upokongaro, 7 March 2022 (photos: Bill Fleury).

### **Other sightings**

This is a compilation of some largely incidental but interesting sightings of other species reported by various observers over the past couple of months.

#### *Australasian Bittern*

On 16 March, Peter Frost saw and photographed an adult Australasian Bittern foraging actively in the middle of the day in the wetlands at Tapuarau Lagoon (Waitōtara).

#### *Spotless Crake*

Jono Gribble reported hearing Spotless Crake calling on 28 February in the wetland on his property off Tokomaru Rd East. At least a couple of pairs seem to be present at this site, but they had been largely silent during summer. Peter Frost saw and photographed 4 or 5 birds (a family group?) at Westmere Reserve on 21 March and heard a second group calling some distance away (Fig. 10). Both groups were in an area of flooded forest at the north-west corner of the lake. From observations of Spotless Crakes elsewhere, it seems that they like sites with reasonably substantial overhead cover. Presumably this provides some protection against aerial predators such as Australasian Harrier, which seems attracted by the crake's calls.



**Fig.10.** Adult (left) and juvenile (right) Spotless Crake, observed at Westmere Reserve, 21 March 2022 (photos: Peter Frost).

### *New Zealand Falcon*

Both male and female New Zealand Falcon, separately and together, have been seen fairly regularly around Bastia Hill over the past couple of months. On two occasions Peter Frost watched a bird briefly hawk a flying insect of some sort. On the first occasion (2 February), the bird first made a dart at what looked like a bumblebee but broke off the engagement, and then went on to seize and consume in flight something less formidable. This is the time of year when there is an upsurge in sightings of falcons around Whanganui, often but not always young birds, presumably dispersing from their natal areas. You can report your sightings through either the New Zealand Bird Atlas portal (<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/home>) or the NZ Falcon Survey website ([www.nzfalcon.org.nz](http://www.nzfalcon.org.nz)). Dave Bell, the coordinator of the survey has published a book summarising the results of the 15 years of the survey. Details of how to obtain a copy can be found in the latest NZ Falcon Survey Newsletter <https://mailchi.mp/8788625ece9e/nz-falcon-newsletter?e=945441ad5f>.

### *Long-tailed Cuckoo*

Following mention in the last newsletter of the sightings of several Long-tailed Cuckoos together at Waitahinga, Francois Rawlinson reported hearing at least 5 birds near the junction of Mataimoana and Ahoroa roads on 4 February. This is on the western side of the Waitōtara R catchment and suggests that these late-summer aggregations could be more widespread than just Waitahinga. A concerted effort to map the distribution and gauge the approximate numbers of calling birds would be a useful exercise next summer.

### *Shining Cuckoo*

Peter Frost heard single short bursts of calling by Shining Cuckoo on Bastia Hill on 1 and 2 February. Later that month (28 February) a female was seen foraging silently in poplars alongside the Whanganui River at Putiki. We know little about just when these cuckoos leave New Zealand for their wintering grounds on the Southwest Pacific islands.

### *North Island Robin*

Paul Gibson and Peter Frost heard at least 4 North Island Robins calling and counter-calling on Lakes Road in South Taranaki, on the way up to Lake Mangawhio. Robins were also heard



calling in the patch forest alongside the lake itself. Jono Gribble saw a pair of what he described as “jet-black” robins on his forest block on Tokomaru Rd East. Most robins apparently get darker with age, although they should all show a central white underbody, from their lower chest to belly. Depending on how they are viewed, the white underbody may be more, or less, apparent. This is the case with Jono’s bird. Although the bird itself looked almost black overall, one can just see the narrow whitish central feathers of the chest and belly (Fig. 11).



**Fig. 11.** An unusually dark North Island Robin photographed in a forest block on Tokomaru Rd East (left), and a male Tomtit seen nearby in regenerating forest (right) (photos: Jono Gribble).

Although the North Island Robin is classed as ‘At Risk, Declining’ in the 2021 assessment of the conservation status of birds in Aotearoa New Zealand, the species proves to be remarkably tenacious in some parts of the North Island. That is certainly the case in the Whanganui District, where at the right time of year North Island Robins can be heard singing across the region in both large and small forest patches. In some cases, such as Kitto’s Bush, on Tokomaru Rd West, the species has survived in a ~30-ha native forest remnant since at least the mid-1990s.

The species is not simply confined to such patches as relicts, but can occasionally be seen away from them, in adjacent forested areas where they are not normally seen. Such was likely the case with a North Island Robin that surprised Jim Norris when it approached him while he was looking for Nankeen Night-herons at Upokongaro. What factors might account for this species’ ability to survive the various threats they face (the most important one probably being nest predation by rats)? First, although robins are clearly a species of native forests, they are not confined to these but can be found in pine plantations and mature scrub (regenerating forest). Second, they seem to do reasonably well even in transformed



landscapes, provided there is a mosaic of wooded habitats embedded in these along which the birds can disperse. Third, they will undoubtedly benefit from any control on the numbers of rats and other non-native predators.

Finally, how do robins interact with Tomtits? The conventional wisdom seems to be that when robins thrive, Tomtits decline, but is that true? There may be microhabitat segregation, with Tomtits favouring dense tangles within a forest (whereas robins seem to prefer an open forest floor, given that they feed primarily on invertebrates in the litter layer). Tomtits also often occur on forest edges, occasionally venturing outside to perch on and forage from isolated trees and fences. Jono Gribble has both species on his property (Fig. 11), with Tomtits both on the edges of pine forest and in early regenerating native forest. It will be interesting to see how Tomtits fare as the regenerating forest matures and robins move in to recolonise it.

### **A migration to view vagrants**

In mid-January, an unusual tern was photographed on the beach at the Waikanae estuary. It was soon identified as Black Tern in non-breeding plumage. This was the first New Zealand record of this species, which occurs in Eurasia and North America. In the non-breeding season, Black Terns winter along the coasts of Africa and South America, so it is highly unusual to find one in New Zealand. (There are few records from Australia, where it is also a vagrant.) The presence of this bird triggered a mass migration of bird-watchers from around the country, who flocked to Waikanae initially, then latterly to the rocks at Plimmerton Fire Station, where it reappeared after a couple of days absence. It was last seen on 15 February at Pukerua Bay, having excited bird-watchers for exactly one month.

Among those who went to see the bird were Paul Gibson and Jim Norris, both of whom saw and photographed it at Plimmerton (Fig. 12). There it was mixed in with a large flock of White-fronted Terns, some Black-fronted Terns (an endemic New Zealand species related to the Black Tern and White-winged Black Tern), and a Common Tern (which despite its name is not common in New Zealand). Then, in late-January/early-February, a Sooty Tern appeared, also among the large flock of White-fronted Terns, first at Waikanae, then further down the coast at Pukerua Bay and Plimmerton. The Sooty Tern is a tropical species of the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific oceans. In our region, it breeds on the Kermadec Is but seldom comes as far south as New Zealand. Jim Norris drove back to Pukerua Bay, but couldn't find the bird. He then checked the social media to learn that the bird was at Plimmerton, so he went there and obtained some great photographs of the bird (Fig. 13).

Finding something unusual and seeing a species for the first time are among the joys of watching birds. Who knows, careful observation of the tern flocks that spend time at the Whanganui R mouth, might also reveal some rare or unusual species. Keep looking.

If you have a contribution to a future newsletter—something you've seen, or an interesting place that you visited—why not send it in? All are welcome.

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**Fig. 12.** The Black Tern at Plimmerton, the first confirmed record for New Zealand (photo: Paul Gibson).



**Fig. 13.** An adult Sooty Tern, Plimmerton Fire-Station rocks (photo: Jim Norris).