

A Modern New Look for the Beach Patrol Scheme

Introduction

Records of seabirds found dead on our coastlines have considerable scientific value. A unique long-term record of observations collected through the Beach Patrol Scheme has helped to establish the identity and to some extent the distribution and numbers of more than 115 seabird species in New Zealand coastal seas. Although seabirds can be studied from ships, they are often difficult or impossible to accurately identify at sea, so analysis of records of dead birds, and in some cases examinations of the birds themselves, that are washed up on coastlines is an important way of studying their movements.

A new beach patrol submission facility using home-based computers

A new user-friendly design and a modern new look for the Beach Patrol Scheme was introduced on the Birds New Zealand website on 25 October 2022. A new digital submission procedure will enable observers to submit records through the Birds New Zealand website < <https://www.birdsnz.org.nz/schemes/beachpatrolscheme/> > from their own computer at home, or from a mobile phone. A revised “Beach Patrol Reporting Form” replaces the Beach Patrol cards and sheets that have been used for many years (70 years in the case of cards). The new form can be downloaded from the Birds New Zealand website and printed at home before commencing a patrol. It sets out the information required and provides advice for submitting observations. Members are asked to use this new form as a basis for submitting their observations through the Birds New Zealand website.

Information about species, numbers, stage of maturity and freshness will continue to be recorded but in order to increase the scientific value of observations most questions will need to be answered; these are called “required fields”. New Beach Patrol records cannot be submitted unless all “required fields” are completed. In the past, estimates of bird maturity and the freshness of birds, also plumage contamination from ships oil, were not always submitted leading to many incomplete records. In addition to noting evidence of oil polluted birds, records can also be made of birds caught on fishing lines and birds that have been shot. Observers can upload photographs of dead birds - helpful for confirming or for requesting identification. But please only submit photographs if it is necessary to assist with bird identification; don't provide photographs if identification is not in doubt because the needless storage of image files on the website is costly to the Society.

A beach patrol report should be submitted as a **NIL** return if no birds are found. It is just as important to know when and where birds are not washing up on beaches, as it is to know when and where they are being found.

The effective but slow and costly process used between 2015 to 2020 to construct the database (scanning Beach Patrol cards/sheets and double-entry of records) has been discontinued. This approach served an essential purpose for the digitisation of card records that spanned about 65 years of effort by members but is now superseded by the more efficient direct entry of records using home-based computers, or mobile phones.

An historical note

The Birds New Zealand Beach Patrol Scheme formally commenced in 1951, more than 70 years ago. However, the earliest records (diving petrel, gannet, fluttering shearwater and little penguin) were made on two Wellington beaches nearly 80 years ago (March 1943) by Mr. H. Secker, who in addition to being a keen natural history observer was also a military officer serving in the NZ Army during World War II. Indeed, it is likely that the first records were made during “beach patrols” by soldiers who regularly made security checks of our beaches.

Objectives of the Beach Patrol Scheme

The overall objective of beach patrolling is to collect and record information on all birds found dead on beaches, including seabirds, landbirds and wetland bird species.

Specific objectives are:

- To provide information on the species, location and numbers of all birds found dead on the New Zealand coastline, including islands.
- To record, where possible the reasons, for seabird mortality.
- To increase the collection of birds for museums, especially of rarely found species.
- To provide specimens of birds for scientific study.
- To increase the chances of recovering banded birds.
- To provide opportunities for members to identify seabirds.

How is beach patrolling done?

A beach patrol is a walk, or a ride on a bicycle or a slow drive in a car, along and above the high tide line of a beach or rocky coastline to find, identify and record what birds have been washed ashore. Patrols may occur at any time of the year and after any type of weather, although highest mortalities often occur after storms with onshore winds, especially in winter. Exposed beaches often yield more dead birds than do harbours. Some regions of the Society organise groups of members to take turns to lead a monthly or fortnightly patrol of suitable beaches. Regular monthly beach patrols are most often carried out in Northland, Auckland, South Auckland, Waikato and Southland.

Although infrequent beach patrols are always helpful it is regular patrols that can yield good information on the occurrence and mortality of birds. Records of species that occur infrequently, or have never been found in New Zealand, are valuable and contribute to our knowledge of bird occurrence and distribution. Several rarities have been found, some only once or twice, and include Adélie penguin, Bridled tern, Manx shearwater, Bulwer’s petrel, Cory’s shearwater, streaked shearwater, Newell’s shearwater and Matsudaira’s storm petrel. Numerous specimens of rare birds have been added to museum collections. Occasionally banded birds have been recovered during beach patrols.

The length of beaches that are patrolled helps to determine whether there has been significant mortality of seabirds on specific beaches, and enables comparisons to be made of species abundance per kilometre between regions and over time. Data has also contributed to a much-

improved understanding of the distribution, abundance, seasonal or annual movements and migrations and sometimes of the causes of deaths of birds.

Beach Patrol submissions can be made at any time; there is no need to accumulate records – so do submit them soon after each patrol. Short submissions, for example, NIL returns, or records of just one or two species, can easily be made from a mobile phone at a carpark, or even on a beach, when a beach patrol comes to an end. A receipt of each submission will be emailed to the primary observer and will include a record of the information that has been provided.

In March 2022, the database comprises nearly 30,000 records; more than 440,000 birds have been counted. The Beach Patrol Scheme is one of the oldest of the long-term research schemes managed by our Society, and is one of the oldest continuously managed biological databases in New Zealand.

Common names of birds are used when submitting observations

Common names are used when submitting Beach Patrol reports because most members are not scientists and are more familiar with common names for everyday use than they are with scientific names. Common names are in the *Checklist of the Birds of New Zealand*, 5th Edition. Checklist Committee (OSNZ). 2022. Ornithological Society of New Zealand Occasional Publication No.1. Refer also to < <https://www.birdsnz.org.nz/society-publications/checklist/> >. When submitting new observations, a drop-down menu will appear on the screen in the “Common name of bird” field (box) when the first two or three letters of a common name are entered, then select the name of the bird. The aim of this approach is to simplify and speed up the submission of records and to eliminate naming errors.

A second field requires selection of the corresponding “Species name or category in the pre-2021 database”. The purpose of requiring the entry of names in two fields is to link new observations using 2022 common names with the names of birds that were recorded in the database earlier than 2021; many bird species were renamed in the 2022 Checklist of the Birds of New Zealand.

What happens to Beach Patrol observations after submission?

Observations submitted following a beach patrol do not immediately enter the database; all submissions will be reviewed to ensure they are realistic concerning bird identity, locality, numbers and in respect of any comments made, measurements provided and the identification of birds shown in photographs. Each submission will be placed in a “draft folder” until it is reviewed by an adjudicator who will check each record before it is added to the database. The adjudicator might email the submitter in order to clarify matters that appear to be unclear. These essential steps are to ensure that the quality of the database will always be high.

A transition period for the entry of recent records submitted on cards

It is appreciated that many Beach Patrol records have been received since scanning and the double entry of information on cards and sheets ended in 2018. A transition period of a few

weeks will provide time for these to be received and entered by the Beach Patrol Convenor but from 1st January 2023 new submissions will only be received through the new on-line data entry facility.

During the transition period in late 2022 the following rules will be applied when observations recorded on the old cards/sheets are entered into the database.

- Name of beach: As recorded on the card.
- Nearest town/city: Unless specifically recorded the nearest town/city will be determined by the Convenor.
- Start point: Unless specifically recorded the term 'beach carpark' will be entered.
- Finish point: Unless specifically recorded the term 'not known' will be entered.
- Initial and Name of observer: As recorded on the card.
- Email address: The email address of the primary observer will be used if it is known to the Convenor. Otherwise, the email of the Regional Representative will be used.
- Current weather and tide, and Previous weather: Unless specifically recorded the term 'not known' will be entered.
- Age and Freshness: Unless specified by the patroller bird numbers will be entered in the Freshness A 'Unknown' field.

Members are encouraged to continue to submit Beach Patrol observations

Council hopes that this new approach and design for submitting Beach Patrol observations will encourage members to continue to contribute to this important long-running Birds New Zealand research scheme. It is also hoped that newer and younger members will be encouraged to walk or cycle along beaches and contribute observations in order to continue and extend the Beach Patrol effort that has been made by more than 300 members over the last 70 years.

Ian Armitage
Beach Patrol Convenor and Councillor