

Birds Whanganui
e-Newsletter September–November 2022



Young male Asiatic whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus variegatus*
photographed on the Whanganui R by Paul Gibson
(info@upics.co.nz), 24 November 2022

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

Kāhui Mātai Manu o Aotearoa

Wanganui Region “fostering the study and enjoyment of birds”

Contact: birds.whanganui@birdsNZ.org.nz



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

Introduction

With the emergence of spring the attention of the local birding community shifted largely to the Whanganui and other nearby estuaries, and the waders that use them. Three groups of birds are distinguishable on these estuaries: those that are more-or-less permanently present as local breeding species, even if individual birds might move short distances among local estuaries and wetlands; intra-New Zealand migrants, comprising birds moving between their mostly southern breeding grounds and northern wintering areas; and northern hemisphere migrants (including some vagrants) that breed in the Arctic and spend their northern winter in the southern hemisphere (palaeartic migrants). Local interest currently focuses mainly on the last two groups, especially the palaeartic migrants. Over the past 14 years, a banded male Bar-tailed Godwit | Kūaka with a white flag marked with the letters AJD has spent his summer on the Whanganui estuary. This bird was originally caught and marked at Foxton Beach on the Manawatū estuary on 31 October 2008, when he was at least 3 years old. He was first seen on the Whanganui estuary on 19 December 2008, and has returned here every years since, often after going to Foxton Beach first. Would he return here for his 15th summer since being banded?

Estuary Birds

Bar-tailed Godwit | Kūaka

The first Kūaka of the summer season was recorded by Graham Guy on 9 September. It looked thin and worn, and so was likely to have been a very early new arrival. It isn't clear if it was passing through because it took a couple of days for the sighting to become more widely known. Peter Frost and Paul Gibson separately found two birds on the estuary on 7 September, one of which was watched as it flew in and appeared to land for the first time since leaving Alaska c.10 days earlier. It staggered about for a minute or so, as if drunk, before it found its feet and started feeding. Its wings hung down, another indicator of a recent arrival (Figure 1).



Figure 1. A rather tattered-looking adult Bar-tailed Godwit | Kūaka showing the characteristic drooping wings of a bird that has recently arrived from a long multi-day, non-stop flight from Alaska (photo credit. Peter Frost).

This ‘drooping wing’ posture and staggers are unsurprising, considering the energy demands of flying non-stop for over 11,000 km in 8-9 days (or more if the winds are unfavourable). As it is, the birds lose up to half their initial body mass during the flight, much of it comprising fat stored at the start of their journey. But towards the end of their flight, the birds catabolise some of the protein in their breast, leg and other muscles to provide the energy needed to enable them to complete their journey.

Whereas these recently arrived birds seemed to regain their balance and normal posture within an hour or so of arrival, their underlying physical condition obviously takes longer to recover. Until it does, the birds remain vulnerable to predation. As a result, they are especially flighty, taking off at the slightest disturbance. Several instances of these early arrivals being disturbed by young Southern Black-backed Gull | Karoro or responding nervously to overflying Australasian Harriers | Kāhu were noted (Peter Frost, Jim Norris). Solitary birds in particular are likely to be more vulnerable to being preyed on than are birds in flocks. Single birds have to watch out for potential predators while simultaneously trying to forage briskly to recover body condition as quickly as possible. In contrast, in a flock, there are always some individuals with their heads up briefly as they move about foraging, allowing them to detect and react to potential predators more quickly. Meanwhile, the others can continue concentrating on foraging. Taking and analysing video recordings of godwits feeding solitarily and near others would be one way of testing this hypothesis: birds in flocks should spend more time feeding than looking around compared with solitary individuals feeding under similar conditions.

Up until mid-October, arrivals of Kūaka were sporadic, with birds staying for only a day or two before moving on to other sites, where presumably they could benefit from the presence of larger numbers of waders. For example, Paul Gibson counted 170 godwits (including AJD on the Manawatū estuary) on 7th October, when seldom more than 1–2 godwits were present at Whanganui (Figures 2, 3).



Figure 2. Bar-tailed Godwit AJD, photographed by Paul Gibson on the Manawatū estuary on 7 October 2022, having returned for his 15th summer since being banded in October 2008, when he was already at least 3-years old. As in all previous summers, he relocated to the Whanganui estuary at the beginning of December (Photo credit: Paul Gibson).

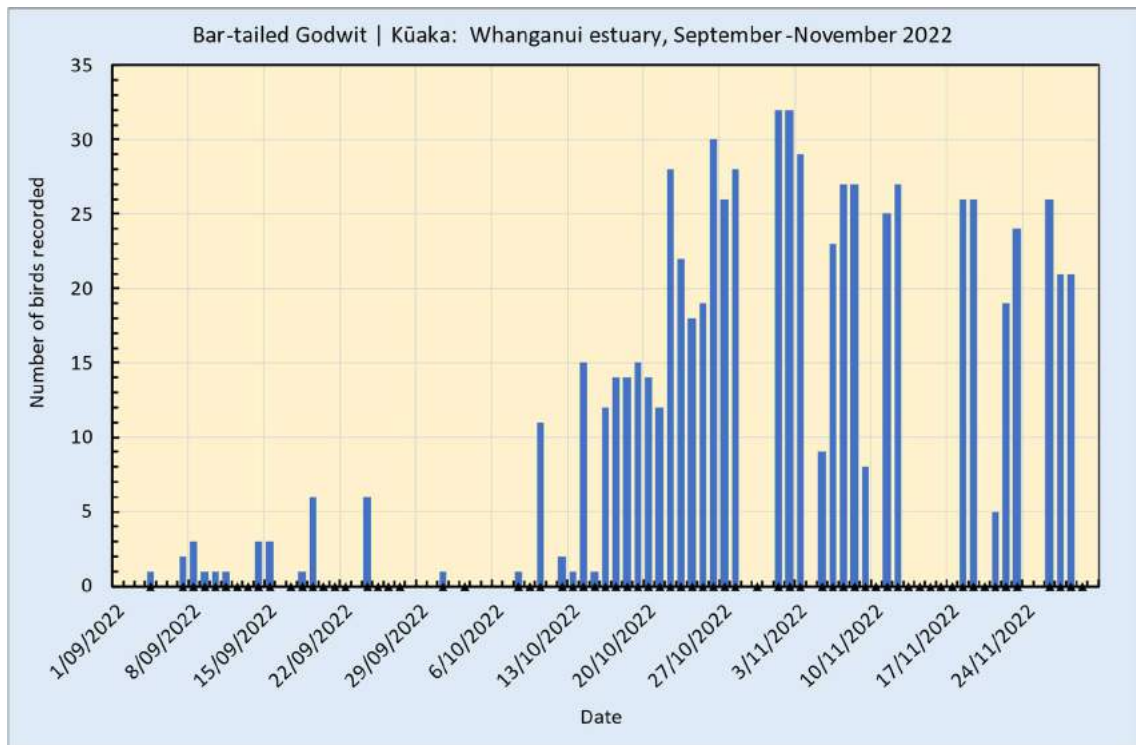


Figure 3. Numbers of Bar-tailed Godwit | Kūaka recorded on the Whanganui estuary, September–November 2022. Days on which visits were made are shown by black triangles along the bottom axis. Instances when visits occurred but no godwits were recorded often reflect visits made at high tide. The limited space for birds to roost at high tide causes them to move elsewhere, probably to neighbouring estuaries.

All of the early arrivals were adults (adults leave Alaska 4–6 weeks ahead of their young). The first juveniles were recorded on 10th October when Paul Gibson found 10 young birds and one adult on the estuary. They were particularly restless and had apparently only recently arrived. They were not seen on the subsequent two days, suggesting that they had moved on. On the afternoon of 13th October, Lynne Douglas saw a flock of 15–20 godwits flying upriver, which may have included some young birds. Another hiatus followed until 16th October when Jim Norris recorded 10 juveniles and two adults.

From then on numbers grew slowly and erratically, but with a near constant presence of young birds, accompanied by the occasional adult. The numbers peaked on 1st November, when Paul Gibson found 32 birds, 28 of which were juveniles (Figure 3). He recorded the same number the next day, this time including AJD. Paul had photographed him at Foxton Beach four days earlier (as well as in mid-October: Figure 2). AJD’s early November visit was fleeting because he was not seen again on the Whanganui estuary until 3rd December, since when he appears to have settled locally for the summer. This is more-or-less the same timetable that he adopted in almost all previous years.

The contrast in plumage between adult and juvenile Bar-tailed Godwits is particularly obvious at this stage, but from about mid-November onwards it becomes more difficult to distinguish the age of the birds, at least when viewed at a distance through binoculars. Juveniles have a bright, spangled appearance to their upperparts (wing coverts, scapulars and mantle), and their feathers look fresh, showing little wear-and-tear. In contrast, the upperparts of adults have more subdued patterns, with the wing coverts, scapulars and mantle showing less contrast (Figure 4). Moreover, when viewed closely, these feathers are distinctly worn, showing frayed edges.



Figure 3. Difference in plumage of adult (top left) and juvenile (bottom right) Bar-tailed Godwit | Kūaka photographed in the Whanganui estuary in early November 2022 (photo credit: Peter Frost).

The behaviour of these juveniles was in marked contrast to that of the small number of adults seen earlier. Although no doubt equally drained after making their non-stop, trans-Pacific flight from Alaska, they appeared less nervous than the adults, not only of overflying gulls (Graham Guy observed some Southern Black-backed Gulls attempting to harass a group of young godwits) but even of people. Being only around 4-months old and having flown from the vastness of Alaska to New Zealand, they probably had not encountered people before, and therefore did not perceive any major threat.

Curlew Sandpiper

Three Curlew Sandpiper visited the estuary briefly in the mid-afternoon of 19 September (Peter Frost). They were together, feeding avidly along the edge of the incoming tide, in an area of soft mud. They were still present at 3:15 PM but had flown off when Jim Norris looked for them around 5 PM. Around the same time (4:19 PM), Neil Haggarty photographed a solitary Curlew Sandpiper at the Manawatū estuary, 60 km SSE of Whanganui. Could this have been one of the Whanganui birds? A comparison of photographs taken by the two observers suggests not. The Manawatū bird is overall paler, with a whiter chin, throat and upper breast, and a greyer crown (Figure 4). It may be more than coincidence, however, at all four birds were recorded on the same day, suggesting that they may have been part of small influx at that time. Although Curlew Sandpiper is a regular summer visitor to New Zealand, and has previously been recorded at Whanganui, numbers have declined in recent years. Currently, probably no more than 40 birds reach New Zealand each summer (Adrian Riegen 2013 [updated 2022]. Curlew sandpiper. *In* Miskelly, C.M. [ed.] *New Zealand Birds Online*.: <https://nzbirdsonline.org.nz/species/curlew-sandpiper>). Only two were recorded in the 2021 national summer wader census covering nearly all of the main wader sites (<https://www.birdsnz.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/2021-Wader-Census-Report.pdf>).



Figure 4. Two of three juvenile Curlew Sandpiper recorded on the Whanganui estuary on 19 September 2022 (A, photo credit: Peter Frost) and the same species photographed just over an hour later on the Manawatū estuary (B, photo credit: Neil Haggarty). The Whanganui birds were all similar, being darker on the throat and upper breast, and having reddish-brown crowns, compared with the Manawatū bird, which was probably a separate individual to the Whanganui trio.

Red Knot | Huahou

A few Red or Lesser Knot | Huahou are recorded on the Whanganui estuary almost every spring, usually no more than 1–4 at a time, although a flock of 17 were recorded on 2 October 2011. Like other palaeartic migrants, the numbers of birds reaching New Zealand has declined in recent years, quite probably due to changes in the coastal wetlands in East and South-east Asia through which the birds pass on migration. During the 2021 summer national wader count, slightly over 27,000 Red Knot were recorded (see <https://www.birdsnz.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/2021-Wader-Census-Report.pdf>), a lot less than the c.60,000 recorded in the early 1990s (Battley. P.F. 2013 [updated 2022]. Red knot | huahou. In Miskelly, C.M. (ed.) *New Zealand Birds Online*. <https://nzbirdsonline.org.nz/species/lesser-knot>).

Red Knot were recorded on 10 days between 17 October and 27 November, and included both young birds, with greenish legs) and adults (with grey legs). Most occurred as singletons, usually in the company of Bar-tailed Godwits, but two groups of three and one of four birds were seen. None stayed for more than a few days; most apparently moved on to other sites. When on their wintering grounds during the southern summer, Red Knot feed primarily on molluscs, which they crush with their muscular gizzards. On the Whanganui estuary, where it was possible to see what the birds were feeding on, their main prey appeared to be the New Zealand mud snail *Potamopyrgus antipodarum*, although other molluscs are also consumed (Figure 5).

Whimbrel

The prize find of the season was a young male Asiatic Whimbrel, first seen by Paul Gibson on 7 November. Since then, it has apparently been present every day, at least up to the time of writing (16 December). The only previous record of Whimbrel on the Whanganui estuary was one seen by Paul on 27 November 2019, when it stopped over for less than a day. Whimbrel are one of the less common palaeartic waders recorded annually in New Zealand. Only 27 were counted during the 2021 national summer wader survey, down from 47 the previous year and an average of 34 over the previous five years in 2015–2019 (<https://www.birdsnz.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/2021-Wader-Census-Report.pdf>).

Throughout this period, the whimbrel has associated closely with a core group on 18–20 godwits, mostly juveniles, except when the birds are spread out foraging over the intertidal mudflats. In contrast to the godwits, most of which feed by probing the mud for polychaete worms (some occasionally catch small crabs), the whimbrel appears to specialise on crabs, which are abundant on the estuary (Figure 6). On one occasion, he caught and consumed three crabs in c.10 minutes. His manner of hunting was to stride rapidly over the mud, stopping periodically to probe the sediments, often to extract a crab, which was then tossed around before being ingested. In contrast, the godwits usually adopted a more area-restricted mode of foraging, rapidly probing the surrounding sediments for polychaete worms.



Figure 5. Red Knot (adult, foreground, showing some remnants of its breeding plumage) eating an unidentified mollusc (photo credit: Paul Gibson)



Figure 6. The whimbrel apparently specialised on hunting crabs (A), which necessitated periodically regurgitating these crustaceans' hard, indigestible exoskeletons (B). Both photographs by Paul Gibson.

When with the godwits, the whimbrel seemed to prefer a central position in the flock. If the birds shifted, leaving it on the edge, it would rapidly move back towards the centre, displacing godwits in its way, if necessary. Although Asiatic Whimbrels are marginally larger than Bar-tailed Godwits, the Whanganui male is a bit smaller than a female godwit. His threat posture is one with his chest out and head held up, leaning backwards, as he advances on the godwit in his way (Figure 7). The latter usually moves aside with little resistance.



Figure 7. Threat posture of the male Asiatic Whimbrel as he challenges a Bar-tailed Godwit (out of view). Photograph by Paul Gibson.

The male whimbrel, now nicknamed Wiremu, proved remarkably tame, unlike whimbrels generally. Paul Gibson speculated that this tameness is due in part to his young age, and therefore greater naïveté to surrounding potential threats, as well as to his association with a large group of equally naïve juvenile godwits. Credit must also go to the many photographers, both local and from further afield, who have gone out to the estuary to photograph the bird and done so with minimum intrusion and disturbance. Wiremu's presence certainly provided many opportunities to photograph a subtly attractive, uncommon species (Figure 8).

All this activity also resulted in some other notable sightings. For example, on 11 November, Neil Haggarty photographed a solitary cattle egret, which briefly landed on a driftwood snag in the river, before flying off. The bird was not in full breeding plumage, having dark legs and only a splash of yellow-orange colouring on its forehead and a slight tinge on its breast. The previous late record, even later than this one, was of a bird photographed by Jim Norris on the estuary on 16 December 2021. It is still notable, however, especially considering that the bird was present for no more than a few minutes.



Figure 8. A selection of photographs of the Asiatic Whimbrel ('Wiremu') taken by local photographers (photo credits in parentheses). A. Taking off, exposing the finely barred underwing coverts and flanks (Jacqui McGown); B. Standing on one leg, a typical wader pose, showing the dark sides to the crown and curved bill (Ormond Torr); C. In flight, displaying the finely barred flight feathers, underwing coverts and flanks (Jim Norris); D. Playing with a stick, revealing the pale crown with dark stripes on either side (Jim Norris); E. Catching a crab, the whimbrel's main food on the Whanganui estuary (Paul Gibson); F. Catching yet another crab (Peter Frost).

Caspian Tern | Taranui

Up to eight Caspian Tern | Taranui were present at any one time on the Whanganui estuary during spring, although the total number of birds that visited overall was probably greater. On 9 September three pairs were recorded (none banded), along with an unbanded juvenile/immature (still importuning of the two adults). On other occasions, several birds with white alpha-numeric coded bands were seen. Of those that could be identified, one was an adult (with the coded band A40) and two were immature birds (J49

and J64). All three birds had been banded at Bell Island in the Waimea Inlet, Nelson, the last two as chicks in December 2021. Bell Island is the principal site from where colour-banded Caspian Tern seen in previous years on the Whanganui estuary have come. The number of terns gradually diminished during October and November as the adults presumably returned to their breeding colony, leaving just the banded and some unbanded immatures behind (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Caspian Tern J64, an immature bird banded as a chick at Bell Island, Waimea Inlet, Nelson, in December 2021. J64 was the Caspian Tern most often seen and photographed on the Whanganui estuary in 2022 (photo credit: Graham Guy).

Other Waders and Waterbirds

South Island Pied Oystercatcher | Tōrea, Wrybill | Ngutu pare and Royal Spoonbill | Kōtuku ngutupapa were the main native species migrating through the Whanganui estuary in spring. Royal Spoonbill were the more constant presence, although numbers fluctuated widely (Figure 10). All groups greater than five were almost certainly migrants, seldom staying for more than a day. Some of the larger groups may even have comprised temporary mergers of two smaller groups, based on observation of some of these groups fissioning prior to their departure. The largest group, 22, was photographed flying in together to the estuary from the Whanganui river mouth on 13 October (Figure 11). These birds could have been migrating along the coast from north-west to south-east, stopping over briefly at the estuary on the way.

Among the other regional migrants, small numbers of South Island Pied Oystercatcher |Tōrea were recorded on the estuary at irregular intervals, most apparently staying for less than a day, some for only a few hours. The maximum number was 11 on 7 September, with another flock of 10 being seen on 8 October. Otherwise, most groups were small, averaging just over 4 birds (range 1–7). Some of these groups migrated at night, based on birds heard calling around midnight on several occasions as they overflew the eastern suburbs of Whanganui in a N–S direction (Peter Frost).

Even smaller numbers of Wrybill | Ngutu pare were reported, being recorded on only six days. But this probably only involved five groups (average just over 3, range 2–5), as one group of three apparently stayed around for two consecutive days before moving on. This pattern is similar to that of previous years, in which the passage of wrybill through the estuary in spring is variable both in timing and numbers.

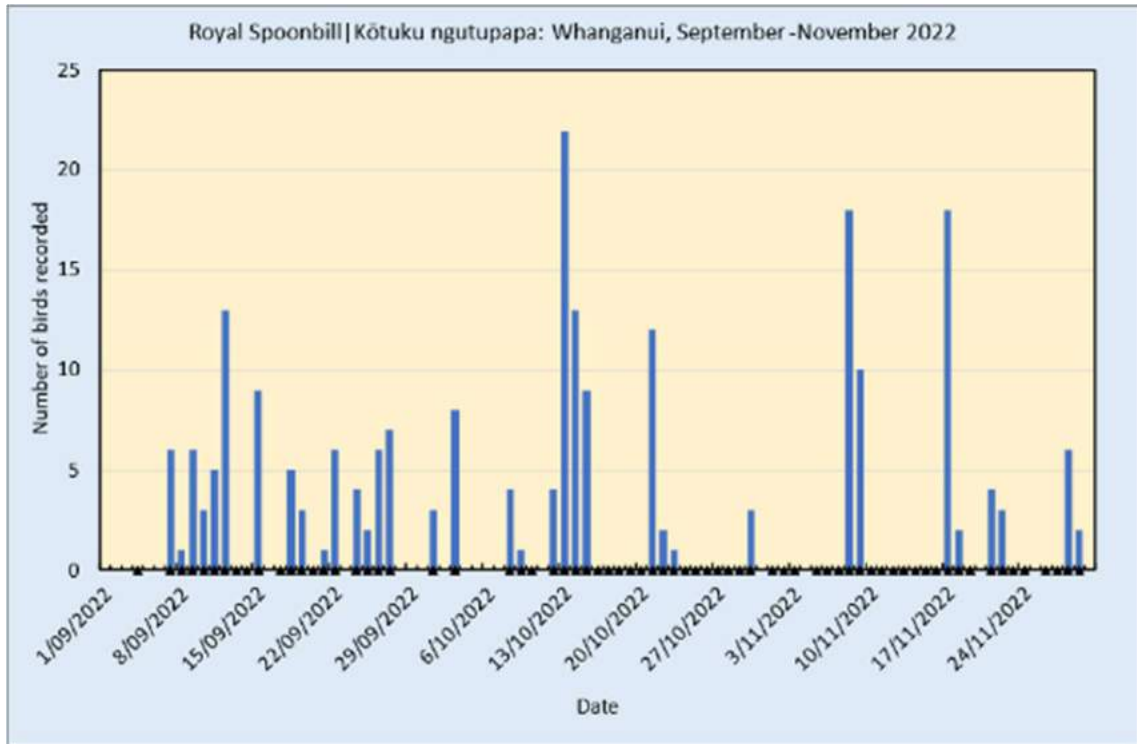


Figure 10. Numbers of Royal Spoonbill | Kōtuku ngutupapa recorded on the Whanganui estuary, September–November 2022. The days on which observers visited the estuary are shown by black triangles along x-axis. Even then, the absence of spoonbills on some days when none were recorded may be more apparent than real because the birds tended to roost on the north tip of Corliss Island, which was not always surveyed.



Figure 11. A flock of 22 Royal Spoonbill | Kōtuku ngutupapa flying into the estuary from the mouth of the Whanganui R (photo credit: Paul Gibson).

The main local residents are Pied Stilt | Poaka, Spur-wing Plover, Variable Oystercatcher | Tōrea Pango, and Southern Black-backed Gull | Karoro. Poaka do not breed on the estuary but in flooded meadows and other open wetlands. Their numbers also fluctuated markedly, with 2–4 birds usually being present, interspersed with brief spikes in numbers (*e.g.*, nine on 11 September, 26 on 6 November, 11 on 18 November, and 22 on 27 November,). None of these larger flocks were present for more than a day, but it is unclear what they represent. Are they post-breeding aggregations moving through the coastal wetland systems as weather, food supplies and disturbance dictate, or are they regional migrants moving from their wintering grounds to breeding areas elsewhere in the southern North Island or northern South Island? We do not know.

No noteworthy patterns were evident in the occurrence and numbers of Spur-wing Plover, Variable Oystercatcher | Tōrea Pango, or Southern Black-backed Gull | Karoro. Graham Guy found a pair of Spurwing Plover nesting in a small fenced paddock in the industrial zone adjacent to Beach Rd. The pair apparently managed to hatch their eggs and get away with two chicks before the grass was cut (Figure 12). This is testament to the adaptability of this hyper-vigilant, self-introduced species.



Figure 12. Spurwing Plover nesting in a small paddock in a light industrial area adjacent to Beach Rd (photo credit: Graham Guy).

The small colony of Pied Shag | Kāruhiruhi at Pūtiki continues to go from strength to strength. There were four occupied nests there on 11 September, with a fifth being built. The occupied nests all had birds either incubating eggs or brooding small chicks (Jim Norris, Peter Frost). By the end of October, the number of occupied nests had grown to 7–8, all containing young of various ages (Ormond Torr). The first recently fledged juvenile was seen on the river on 18 November. The sight of adults flying down to the lower estuary and river mouth to forage, and later returning upstream to the colony at Pūtiki, is now a regular occurrence on the river, yet the species was unrecorded on the estuary until 2010. Pied Shag are also now also seen regularly on the Whangaehu and Waitōtara estuaries, although there is no evidence yet that they are nesting at either site.

Birds at Other Estuaries

Many fewer visits were made to three other estuaries in the region. The road to the Whangaehu estuary was waterlogged and only one visit to the river mouth and estuary was possible (Peter Frost, 6 November 2022). Nothing unexpected was recorded. Black-fronted Dotterel are now a permanent presence there; one was seen (but six were present during a later mid-December survey). Pied Shag | Kāruhiruhi (1) and Canada Goose | Kuihi (13, including one pair with at least two medium-sized downy goslings) were the only other notable species. This is also the first year since the mid-1980s when no Cattle Egret were recorded from the farms midway along Whangaehu Beach Rd.

A visit to the Turakina estuary and Koitiata Lagoon on the same day was more rewarding. A Banded Dotterel | Pohowera nest with three eggs was found in an area of small sand drifts and dried mud, close to where the people with 4WD vehicles access the beach. Nearby, a Black-fronted Dotterel pair were observed with a recently hatched chick (Figure 13).



Figure 13. Banded Dotterel chick at Koitiata Lagoon, 6 November 2022 (photo credit: Peter Frost)

Like other waders, dotterel chicks are precocious, feeding for themselves from the outset, although the parents still keep watch and brood the chicks until the latter's body feathers have grown sufficiently to provide the necessary insulation. This chick would forage up to 3 m away from the watchful parent, mainly the female, for 3–5 minutes before returning to be brooded. Juvenile Black-fronted Dotterel have been seen before at Koitiata, but this is the first evidence of the species actually breeding at the lagoon. It marks the furthest point west in the Black-fronted Dotterel's current expansion as a breeding species through the coastal regions of the southern North Island.

Overall, seven Banded Dotterel | Pohowera and the two Black-fronted Dotterel and chick were seen. One male Banded Dotterel was particularly aggressive towards the Black-fronted Dotterels, chasing them off if they ventured into the Banded Dotterel's territory. Besides the dotterels, there were also 16 Bar-tailed Godwit | Kūaka, 2 Ruddy Turnstone and 27 Pied Stilt | Poaka. Paul Gibson and Jim Norris photographed what were probably the same turnstones on 17 November, a species that they also recorded last summer (4 December 2021). The 16 Bar-tailed Godwits observed on 6 November were too far away for any details to be seen, but during the later—17 November—visit, the nine birds present were all juveniles.

Only one visit was made to the Waitōtara estuary (Peter Frost, 9 November). The visit was happened to be made at high tide when there were few birds about. One adult Pied Shag | Kāruhiruhi, one Banded Dotterel | Pohowera, five Bar-tailed Godwit | Kūaka (including at least three juveniles), three Pied Stilt | Poaka, a couple of Spurwing Plovers, and a solitary Caspian Tern | Taranui were the only notable species.

Inland Birds

Kākā

With the shift in focus to the Whanganui estuary, records of birds from inland areas dropped off. The Great Kākā Hunt (see the June-August newsletter) ended, with just a couple of sightings of a solitary bird, probably the female, at Bason Botanic Garden during mid- to late-October. But then a couple of reports from members of the public emerged in November of 1–2 birds being seen at Rotokawau Virginia Lake. Neither were able to be confirmed, however, although kākā are so distinctive that it is hard to believe that the observers, with no particular interest in the outcome, would mistake what they saw for anything else.

Nankeen Night-heron | Umu Kōtuku

Jim Norris continues to monitor the Nankeen Night-herons at Upokongaro. The café garden where the night-herons can be regularly found has proved to be a magnet for travelling birdwatchers (including a couple of tour groups), helped by news that the birds may be nesting nearby. Whereas this attention is pleasing, it has heightened the risk that the birds may be disturbed by the sight of people craning their necks to see and photograph the birds. This in turn attracts members of the public who want to know what the attraction is, so numbers swell further and the excited chatter increases. Throughout it all, the birds seem remarkably unperturbed, either just staring down at the viewers below or moving silently further into the canopy out of sight. Of course, the disappearance simply increases the intensity of searching by those intent on seeing the birds and ticking them off on their life list. This illustrates the fine line to be drawn between advertising the birds' presence and unique status (in New Zealand, Nankeen Night-herons only breeds along the Whanganui River, as far as we know), in the hope of increasing people's awareness and understanding of the species, and the resulting risk of disturbance if that interest proves to be too intrusive.

As the birds are so difficult to see during the daytime, because they roost inside the dense canopies of several trees alongside the Upokongaro Stream, the most reliable way to determining the number of birds present is to count them as they leave their roosts at dusk. The problem is that they leave a considerable time after sunset (Figure 14). The average departure time at two sites that have been monitored locally, Kemp's Pole, at the confluence of the Kauarapaoa Stream and the Whanganui River (monitored 2008–2016) and Upokongaro (departure times recorded in 2022), average just under 29 minutes after sunset, by which time the birds are usually only visible as silhouettes against the evening sky (Figure 15).

Despite this difficulty, Jim has kept a watchful eye on the birds and their numbers, both at the roost in daytime, spread among several trees along the Upokongaro Stream, and on departure after sunset. The maximum recorded was six on 18 September, but the average is just under four birds per occasion. It is highly likely that some birds get missed at the time of departure, because they leave their roosts within a few minutes of each other. Departure is usually preceded by loud calls and counter-calls among the roosting birds. Most also call on departure. Those that do not call are the ones most likely to be missed. The significance of these pre-departure calls is not known but may be linked to coordinating departure and helping ensure contact among birds as they fly off to their feeding grounds. Whether the birds feed collectively is not known. There is still much to discover about this enigmatic species.

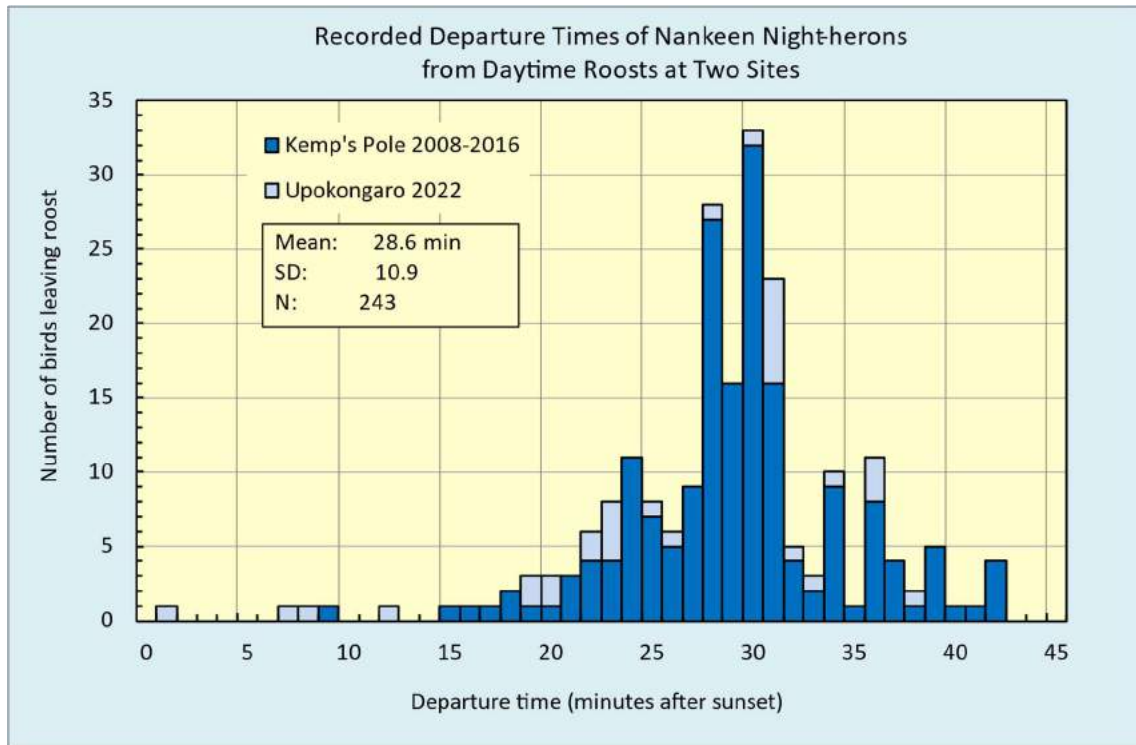


Figure 14. Recorded departure times of Nankeen Night-heron | Umu kōtuku at two roost sites on the Whanganui R. Most birds leave when it is almost dark (data credits: Peter Frost [Kemp’s Pole]; Jim Norris [Upokongaro]).



Figure 15. A more-or-less typical view of a Nankeen Night-heron departing its roost after sunset (photo credit: Jim Norris).

Spotless Crake | Pūweto

This is another enigmatic species. Its small size, dark plumage and secretive habits make Spotless Crake a difficult species to find. The best way is to become familiar with its calls. These include a harsh, extended vibrating “grrrr” call (probably used to advertise the bird’s territory); a sharp “whit” or “phut” call (probably a mild alarm call); and a conversational series of bubbling warbles, which seem to be contact calls. All three calls can be heard in the recording at New Zealand Birds Online from the McPherson Natural History Unit Sound Archive (<https://nzbirdsonline.org.nz/species/spotless-crake>).

The best place locally to hear and possibly see this species is at Westmere Lake on Rapanui Road, especially along the bush track alongside the northern arm of the lake beyond the picnic site. Both Peter Frost and Jim Norris heard two birds calling there on 26 September and 7 October, respectively. The species may be more widespread than is commonly recognized and has been recorded from several small wetlands and wooded streams in the region. One of these is just off Tokomaru East Rd. Jono Gribble heard and saw one of two pairs there on 5 November and again, together with Peter Frost, on 8 November. Jono does extensive predator trapping and tree planting in this area and was awarded a Kanorau Koiira Taketake – Indigenous Biodiversity Community Grant by Horizons Regional Council to help with this initiative. The continuing presence of Spotless Crake and Fernbird (see below) at this site over several years shows the value of his work.

Fernbird | Mātātā

Perhaps because of limited travel into the interior of the region, largely a function of the poor weather and dire state of many unsealed roads, observers reported fewer records of Fernbird | Mātātā than in the past. Early in spring, Esther Williams recorded them calling where the Kauarapaoa Rd crosses the Whakangaromanga Stream. Peter Frost reported one calling at Koitiata on 9 September, as well as at several places around Tapuarau Lagoon, at the mouth of the Waitōtara R (15 September, 9 November). One of the most reliable places is just off Tokomaru East Rd, where Jono Gribble and Peter Frost photographed several different individuals on 8 November (Figure 16), and on a neighbouring property where Jono Gribble heard birds calling from four separate locations on 26 November. This is another species that because of its secretive behaviour and cryptic plumage is perhaps more widespread than is commonly realised. Knowing the species’ calls is the best way to find the birds (listen to the many calls available at <https://www.nzbirdsonline.org.nz/species/fernbird>).



Figure 16. Fernbird | Mātātā photographed just off Tokomaru East Rd (photo credit: Jono Gribble).

New Zealand Falcon

Two reports were received of New Zealand Falcon | Kārearea pursuing feral pigeons in Whanganui in October and November. Colin Ogle observed one pursuing pigeons on 15 October, noting “...a flock of 6-8 rock pigeons came from across the paddock behind our section with a falcon in pursuit and they all headed the same way as the kereru. Again a few seconds later, just 1 rock pigeon came back from Virginia Road and flew over our neighbour’s roof with a falcon on its tail. The falcon made no vocal calls.” In contrast, on 20 November, Jim Norris saw a falcon chasing a rock pigeon and noted: “The two circled and dived with the Falcon keeping in close contact but unable to catch the Rock Pigeon...While chasing the Rock Pigeon, the Falcon was screaming, not constantly but regularly...” The sex of these birds was not known but are likely to have been females, given that a male is barely larger than a rock pigeon and around the same weight. These observations suggest that in more-or-less level flight, Rock Pigeons can outfly falcons, at least in the sense of keeping ahead of them. The question of why some falcons call when they are pursuing prey, while others do not, is unresolved. Is it a sign of an especially hungry falcon, perhaps an inexperienced juvenile or immature, or is it an attempt to frighten the intended prey? Given that the pigeon is fleeing for its life, whereas the falcon, no matter how hungry, is just looking for a meal, the chance that the pigeon would be any further intimidated by its pursuer seems remote.

Like several other urban areas in New Zealand, Whanganui seems to be an increasingly attractive to kārearea. We do not know if this is due to more observers, heightened awareness among them, or a greater interest in people to report what they are seeing. The abundance of small prey—Blackbirds, House Sparrows, small finches, etc.—likely makes urban environments attractive, especially to young falcons that are perhaps having to fend for themselves for the first time. Many of those seen in Whanganui are immature birds. They can be successful, as witnessed by Jim Norris, who reported a male falcon, judging from its size, diving on a group of House Sparrows, apparently successfully as it was seen soon after carrying a small bird in its talons: *sic transit gloria passer*.

Shining Cuckoo | Pīpīwharauoa

As reported in the previous newsletter, Margi Keys heard a Pīpīwharauoa calling at Papaiti on 1 September. This was not the earliest record for the New Zealand this year because members on a Birds New Zealand field trip near Auckland heard a bird calling on 21 August, and Tim Barnard reported birds calling a few days earlier in Kerikeri, Northland, and on 27 August at Okere Falls (Lake Rotoiti) and, further north, at Oropi, south of Tauranga (<https://www.birdingnz.net/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&t=11714>). Nevertheless, Margi’s early September record was notable for our region. Subsequent records for the season were still early (Peter and Sue Frost, 11 September, Bastia Hill; Bill Fleury, 17 September, Marybank; and several records from various observers at Westmere and Bushy Park Tarapurui, 22–28 September). Bill Fleury noted that the bird he heard was about two weeks earlier than in previous years.

Long-tailed Cuckoo | Koekoeā

Each January/early February the hills around Waitahinga ring out with the piercing calls of Long-tailed Cuckoo | Koekoeā, so it is interesting to note that only one bird was heard calling, and then only briefly, during a morning-long visit to the forest on 14 November. Whitehead | Pōpokotea, the principal host of the cuckoo, are common at Waitahinga (the forest was the source of 52 Pōpokotea translocated to Bushy Park Tarapurui in early May). More observations are needed from Waitahinga to determine if Koekoeā are common there throughout spring and early summer, or if the relatively large numbers recorded in late summer reflect some pre-migration gathering before the birds head off to winter on islands in the South-west Pacific.

Birds New Zealand

If you are not already a member of Birds New Zealand, how about becoming one? Membership is \$80 per year, for which you get four copies of the society's general interest magazine, *Birds New Zealand*, and its scientific journal, *Notornis*. For more details of membership plans and fees, see <https://www.birdsnz.org.nz/membership/join-now/>. The website also provides information on all the society's activities, including the New Zealand Bird Atlas Project (<https://www.birdsnz.org.nz/birding/nz-bird-atlas/>). Even if you are not a Birds New Zealand member, you can still contribute to this 5-year (2019–2024) citizen-science initiative. Why not give it a go?



Peter Frost
Regional Representative,
Birds New Zealand (Whanganui)
birds.whanganui@birdsnz.org.nz