

Birds Whanganui
e-Newsletter Summer 2022-2023



Two recently fledged Nankeen Night Heron chicks from the first nest found in New Zealand since 1995. Upokongaro, 3 March 2023 (photo credit: Jim Norris)

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

Kāhui Mātai Manu o Aotearoa

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Introduction

Birding in the Whanganui region this summer has been dominated by two principal happenings: confirmation that the Nankeen Night-herons | Umu Kōtuku at Upokongaro are nesting, the first nests seen in New Zealand since 1995 when Norman Marsh and Gábor Lövei discovered and described the only other nest found; and the return of AJD, a flagged male Bar-tailed Godwit Kūaka, which came back to the Whanganui estuary for the 15th consecutive year since he was banded as a 3-year-old bird in October 2008. The heightened interest, first, in whether he would return and, second, if he did, how he would behave and what company he would keep, resulted in more pairs of eyes looking at the estuary more often. As a result, several less-common species were seen. In other years, without this attention, uncommon species, which seldom stay around for longer than a few hours or a day or two, would likely have gone undetected.

In this newsletter, Jim Norris provides an account of the discovery of the Nankeen Night-heron nests at Upokongaro along with descriptions of what he and other observers saw of the birds and their behaviour as nesting progressed, and of the chicks as they took their first flights away from the nest tree. This is followed by an article from Paul Gibson, summarises sightings from the Whanganui estuary. Paul, who has written a book about AJD — *Feats Beyond Amazing. The Life Story of a Bar-tailed Godwit* (published by Unique Pictorials, www.upics.co.nz — has a particular interest in AJD and his activities. The newsletter concludes with a summary of sightings and accounts of birds recorded elsewhere in the region.

Nankeen Night-heron | Umu Kōtuku

As hinted at in the previous newsletter, observations made by both local and visiting birders to the “Behind the Door on 4” café at Upokongaro in late-October/early-November suggested that the Nankeen Night-herons | Umu kōtuku were getting ready to nest in a Holm Oak¹ above the café’s covered outside seating area, a converted carport. This tree had been the birds’ main roost through much of the 2022 winter. Individual birds have been seen sporadically in this tree in earlier winters, but most appeared to roost in a large macrocarpa midway along the café garden’s boundary above the Upokongaro Stream. Night-herons have been using this site since at least mid-2012 and must have bred there or nearby because photographs from May 2012 clearly shows a juvenile, no more than a couple of months old.

Early signs of nesting this season included birds seen carrying twigs and forming what appeared to be at least one nest, an untidy shallow bowl of sticks, half way up in the Holm Oak’s canopy (for example see <https://www.birdingnz.net/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&t=1809&start=80#p52583>). Although only one nest was visible initially, it soon became apparent that there were more. On 7 December, Michael O’Shea reported seeing three nests in the Holm Oak, with birds attending two of them. Viewing these nests was never easy and involved considerable neck-craning and figure-pointing as one observer tried to point out to others the position of the nests. It is no surprise, therefore, that the birds apparently abandoned the lowest nest in favour of building ones higher up. At this stage, we decided to stop announcing that the birds might be nesting, instead tracking progress and encouraging visitors to view

¹ The holm oak, *Quercus ilex*, is a large evergreen oak with a dense canopy of small bi-coloured leaves, dark green above and grey below. Its specific name, *ilex*, refers to the toothed margins of the leaves, especially of young trees, which are reminiscent of those of the European holly, *Ilex aquifolium*, albeit not as stiff nor the leaf spines so sharp as holly (‘holm’ is an ancient name for holly). The species comes from the west-central Mediterranean but has been introduced to Britain and New Zealand, and occurs in several other regions with a Mediterranean-type climate of hot, dry summers and cool, wet winters. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quercus_ilex)

the birds from a distance. Although Nankeen Night-herons appear to be remarkably unperturbed by human presence and noise, we did not want to test the boundaries of that tolerance.

Jim Norris continued observing birds leaving the colony at dusk, primarily to establish the number of birds present there. He and Peter Frost recorded the flight calls of at least six night-herons as they left the roost on 7 December between 8:26 PM, 12 minutes before sunset, when one bird flew down to the Upokongaro Stream, and 9:07 (29 minutes after sunset) when the last three birds left and flew off downstream on the Whanganui River. The other two birds left around 8:58 PM, but only after moving around among the trees by the café and nearby. These movements and departures were accompanied much calling. Jim Norris counted 133 calls from at least four different birds between 8:04 PM, before the birds started moving, and 9:07 PM when the last birds departed. This contrasted markedly with observations made over the previous couple of months, in which the birds would leave within a few minutes of each other following a brief period of calling before departure around 30 minutes after sunset.

The following evening, 8 December, seven birds were seen leaving the roost trees between 8:31 PM, 8 minutes before sunset, and 9:19 PM, 40 minutes after sunset, again accompanied by much calling. Peter Frost recorded the birds calling during this period and, analysing these afterwards, counted 136, most concentrated between 8:56 and 9:07 PM, around the departure of four birds at 8:59 PM. On 12 and 16 December, Jim Norris counted six and seven birds, respectively, leaving the roost. Seven seems to be the maximum number of presumed-adult birds seen leaving the roost on any one evening over the past few months. Based on the number of birds leaving together, this equates to 2–3 pairs.

Could the greater movement of birds among the roost trees prior to leaving each evening in December, not something noticed in earlier months, along with apparent increased calling between birds, both at the roost and further away along the river, indicate the start of breeding? Intermittent observations of the nests around this time suggested at least one nest had a bird sitting on it during the daytime. On 20 December, Abi Quinnell reported one bird on a nest “face peering directly down at us” (eBird checklist S124284992). Jim Norris followed this up the next day and eventually located three nests. It was not clear if there was a bird on the lowest nest, although an adult was seen leaving the middle nest to stand on a branch nearby. Later, Jim saw an adult go to the highest nest, but was uncertain if this was the same bird as seen earlier coming off the middle nest. Making detailed observations of these nests, and whether there were birds on them or not, was difficult because of the mass of twigs and small branches filling the canopy of the Holm Oak. The nests are sufficiently loosely constructed that light can be seen through them if there is no bird present. On this basis, Jim inferred that at least one of the nests was occupied, as no light could be seen shining through it, and a bird’s tail just visible (Figure 1).

On December 30, Paul Gibson watched a bird fly passed him only a few metres away, then videoed it approaching one of the upper two nests in the Holm Oak. There it stood over the nest, possibly feeding chicks, before apparently changing positions with a bird on the nest. This one scurried away quickly to perch nearby. Jim Norris also saw a change-over at this nest on the same day, with one bird flying up from the Upokongaro Stream, and another seen alongside the stream. Jim wondered if the birds were foraging there for food to feed the chicks (Figure 2).

For at least the first couple of weeks in January, sightings of birds were few and far between. Observations of the Holm Oak nest itself proved difficult because of the mass of intervening twigs and branches. On several occasions that month Jim Norris found only single birds there or nearby (and sometimes none at all), but his same-day evening observations revealed 3–5 birds departing up to 30 minutes after sunset. On each occasion these departures were preceded by brief bursts of calling, but not as pronounced as they had been a month earlier. It is possible that this and the wariness of birds around the Holm Oak was because the birds had chicks. Birds generally go silent and behave more secretively at such times, so as not to give away the location of nests and chicks to any potential predators.



Figure 1. Nankeen Night-heron sitting on the uppermost nest in the Holm Oak. The bird's tail can just be seen over the edge of the nest in the lower centre of the image (photo credit: Jim Norris, taken 21/12/2022).



Figure 2. Adult Nankeen Night-heron landing in the willows alongside the Upokongaro Stream (photo credit: Jim Norris, taken 30/12/2022).

On 30 January, Jim Norris found one night-heron in the Holm Oak but saw no birds at the nests. He later found another on the Upokongaro Stream below the Goose's Roost but, beyond that, there was little sign of any activity. Then, the next day, the staff at the 'Behind The Door On 4' café reported on Facebook that they could see "a wee chick peering over the side of the nest". This rekindled interest in the goings-on at the nest. On 1 February, Paul and Jane Gibson, together with Jim Norris, saw two birds in the Holm Oak but could not see a chick. One of the adults had its neck extended with its head and neck feathers erect (Figure 3). This fits the description of a threat posture given in the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand & Antarctic Birds (Volume 1, Ratites to Ducks, 1990), commonly referred to as HANZAB. Soon after, Jane Gibson saw a Morepork|Ruru sitting close by, facing the night-heron nests. Could this have been what triggered the night-heron's threat posture? Do moreporks pose a threat to nestling night-herons, and did the adult perceive it as such?

Also on 1 February, Jim Norris discovered the discarded shell of a hatched Nankeen Night-heron egg in the leaf litter outside the carport. Other eggshells were discovered the next day in the same area, including two on the roof of the former carport, below the nests, one of which was almost entire except for some large holes in it (and nothing inside). This could have been a predated egg. It measured 55 x 42 mm, at the upper end of the size range of Nankeen Night-heron eggs (photographs can be seen of the BirdingNZ.net website <https://www.birdingnz.net/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&t=1809&start=80#p53598> and <https://www.birdingnz.net/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&t=1809&start=80#p53613>). The eggs were blue-green, and the near-intact egg measured 55 x 42 mm, at the upper end of the size of Nankeen Night-heron eggs. Another couple of eggshells, apparently originally part of the same egg, measured about 48 x 40 mm, at the lower end of Nankeen Night-heron egg sizes. From the colour, texture (chalky exterior) and size there is little doubt that these are Nankeen Night-heron eggs, further evidence that the birds were breeding in the Holm Oak. Two of these eggs have been mounted beneath a glass cover and are in the café library where visitors can view these unique specimens from the first observed nest of a Nankeen Night-heron in New Zealand.

When Jim Norris arrived early on 2 February, before the café officially opened, he noted at least four birds moving about within the Holm Oak canopy. Two of these flew out from the Holm Oak to the river soon after 7.30 AM. He waited for an hour, hoping the birds might return to feed the chicks, but they did not. That afternoon, Jim, Paul Gibson and Graham Guy definitely heard chicks calling from one of the three nests, with adult birds moving on and off another one.

The next major development came on 5 February, when Michael O'Shea watched a pair of birds in the large macrocarpa midway down the garden fence, the tree that in previous years had been the main roost for Nankeen Night-herons. The pair behaved as if they were going to breed. Indeed, a couple of tourists told Michael that they had seen the pair mating and that later one bird had been seen carrying a twig. Michael returned on 8 February to find one of the birds apparently lying flat on what appeared to be a nest, with the second bird in occasional attendance.

Unlike the nests in the Holm Oak, which did not lend themselves to easy or prolonged observation, the nest in the macrocarpa is readily visible from a narrow vantage point on the café's veranda. This has allowed it to be readily viewed and photographed during subsequent visits by many observers over the following few weeks. We estimate that around 25 photographers and others have seen this pair and its nest. The bird on the nest is not always visible, especially as after presumed incubation had started, the birds added more twigs to the open side of the nest, creating a more substantial visual barrier. Nevertheless, both birds could be seen during changeovers, and both the incoming and departing bird often perched on the outside canopies of surrounding trees allowing the photographers to get some fine pictures (Figures 4).



Figure 3. Presumed threat posture of an adult Nankeen Night-heron showing raised feathers on the crown and along outstretched neck, possibly being directed at a nearby Morepork|Ruru (photo credit: Paul Gibson)



Figure 4. Pair of Nankeen Night-herons changing over incubation duties at the macrocarpa nest, photographed on 8/02/2023, near the start of incubation (photo credit: Jacqui McGowan).

Observations at the Holm Oak nest throughout mid-February confirmed the presence of chicks, initially through their begging calls. Paul Gibson managed to video activities at this nest on 14 February, which includes both soft chicken-like clucks from the adult and rapid, high-pitched begging calls of the chicks: “yip, yip, yip...” (about 2 notes per second). This call is distinctive, sounding like a little dog yapping in the distance. It is surprisingly loud, being audible up to 20 metres away across an open space. This is presumably the call referred to in HANZAB: “Said to beg with shrill clamorous *kak-kak-kak* in first two weeks and squawk when disputing among themselves.” As the chicks got older and their body feathers began to develop, they became more mobile and visible, with one chick being photographed as it backed over the edge of the nest, presumably prior to defaecation (Figure 5). Nevertheless, prolonged observation of them was still difficult because of the denseness of the canopy.



Figure 5. Nankeen Night-heron chick backing up over the edge of its nest, presumably prior to defaecating (photo credit: Paul Gibson, image taken 14/02/2023).

As in other herons, incubation in the Nankeen Night-heron start with the laying of the first or second egg, with these being laid at about 2-day intervals (HANZAB). A clutch of 3–4 eggs, hatching asynchronously after an assumed 21–22-day incubation period, would therefore have chicks differing in age and development by 6–8 days. So, if the chick seen by the café staff in the nest at the end of January was recently hatched (based on hatched eggshells being found below the Holm Oak soon after), this would imply that the night-herons were incubating eggs through much of January, perhaps even from late-December onwards.

Chicks apparently start clambering out of the nest when 14–21 days old (HANZAB). The first chick clearly seen outside the nest was noted by Paul Gibson on 17 February and by both Jim Norris and Michael O’Shea over the following two days, respectively. This accords with hatching beginning in late-January. Even though the chicks were beginning to move around in mid-February, the nest remained the focal point of their presence in the tree. Paul Gibson noted that the chicks on the nest on 20 February, with the adults perched nearby. Whether these were all the same chicks is not known, but all were well feathered. Given the disparity in ages because of asynchronous hatching, some chicks may still be in the nest while their older siblings are beginning to move about.

Although a chick was seen on the outside of the Holm Oak on several occasions in the second half of February, the first flight out of the tree only took place on 27 February. Jim Norris recorded an adult flying into and settling on the poplars opposite the Holm Oak. This caused excitement from the two juveniles, one of which took an ungainly leap across the ~10 m gap to the poplar, where it then scrambled along to where the adult had been. Unfortunately, the adult had flown on to the Holm Oak at the same time, leaving the fledgling night-heron stranded in the poplar. At the time, it seem disinclined or unable to fly back to the Holm Oak although it must have done so at some stage, as it was back there the next day. Paul Gibson and Graham Guy also saw one of the youngsters fly to the poplars on 2 March. Earlier, an adult was seen feeding a chick in the outer canopy while the two other fledglings stood nearby in the sun, thereby confirming the presence of three chicks of different sizes and age. On 3 March, two of the youngsters were seen flying across to the poplars where they stayed, providing the several photographers present with many opportunities to take fine photographs (see the cover picture for one example).

Indications of the chicks in the Holm Oak being fed were noted on several occasions during February. These included the chicks heard begging, with adults flying into and moving around inside the canopy of the tree around the same time. Despite this, there were no actual sightings of food transfer, no doubt because of the difficulty of observing the birds in the dense canopy of the Holm Oak, at least for any sustained time. Nevertheless, on 3 February, Paul Gibson photographed an adult Nankeen Night-heron with a cicada in its bill, while on 5 March, Sandra Morris reported seeing an adult night-heron carry what looked like a small eel into the Holm Oak where the three mobile fledglings were. Little is known about the food of Nankeen Night-herons food in New Zealand, but from what is known in Australia, they feed mostly on aquatic organisms—fish, freshwater crayfish (noted as prey in New Zealand), frogs, and insects—but are also opportunistic, taking other prey, including nestlings, small rodents and even human refuse, when available. The two observations made by Paul and Sandra illustrate some of this variety and opportunism.

Observations of the fledged chicks continued for the next few days as they became more adept fliers, on one occasion flying into a tree in the centre of the café's outdoor dining area, so close that Paul Gibson felt he could almost have touched him (Figure 6). The first two fledglings apparently left the immediate vicinity of the café and its surroundings in the second week of March, but the third chick remained behind, still being tended by at least one adult in mid-March.



Figure 6. Recently fledged juvenile Nankeen Night-heron perched in the outside dining area of the 'Behind the Door on 4' café (arrowed, left) and in close-up (right) (photo credit: Paul Gibson, images taken 6 March 2023)

While there was considerable interest in the fledging of the Holm Oak chicks, much of the attention during March was focused on the pair nesting in the macrocarpa because it provided better opportunities to observe activity at the nest. Both birds were involved in incubation and brooding duties, with several instances of change-overs at the nest being recorded. One incubation spell, observed by Paul Gibson on 10 February, was 65-minutes long (2:16–3:21 PM), but others were shorter. Paul Gibson and Jim Norris noted three change-overs in an hour on 20 February, during which time the birds continued to add twigs to the nest, making 10 trips between them in a 90-minute period. As a result of this continued nest-building, the incubating bird became progressively harder to see, at least until a change-over occurred (Figure 7).

On 5 March, Jim Norris saw what looked like movements of a chick in the macrocarpa nest. One or more chicks were heard calling from the nest on 6 March by Paul and Jane Gibson, and on 7 March by Peter Frost and four others. Both parents were seen brooding the chick(s), with one spell lasting 48 minutes (Sandra Morris, 12 March). At the time of writing, there are at least two chicks present in this nest.

Jim Norris



Figure 7. Change-over of brooding Nankeen Night-heron at the macrocarpa nest, 12 March 2023 (photo credit: Sandra Morris).

Whanganui River Estuary

The summer months are peak period for unusual waders and other species on the Whanganui Estuary. Beyond our regular birds, we are always looking for, and hoping to find, some unusual wader passing through. Although not considered a top estuary for birds, the range of species that we have observed over the years is surprising. In fact, there have been very few wader species that have not showed up here, although finding birds like Marsh Sandpiper, Grey Plover, and Far-eastern Curlew were particularly pleasant surprises. Perhaps the secret is that the nearness and relatively small size of the estuary makes it easy to check often and relatively quickly. Close access to the birds also allows us to study and photograph them. This year has not seen many rarities, but we are happy with what we have found. The following is a brief overview of the birds found on the estuary over the last three months.

Whimbrel

As was mentioned and illustrated in the last newsletter we were privileged to have a Whimbrel visit the estuary in early November 2022. We initially thought it might soon move on, as many other rare species tend to do, but he ended up staying for two and half months. My last photo of him was on 16 January 2023, but Peter Fryer from Taranaki saw him on 18 January. He was a young male, so this was his first migration south, and he was still learning, including about local threats. Whereas Whimbrel are generally difficult to approach, his initial inexperience of threats gave us great close access to him. He spent his time with a small group of mostly juvenile godwits, and I often commented to people that, by now, he likely thinks he is a godwit. His diet was different though, as he was seen eating crabs, one after the other. In contrast, godwits mainly eat marine worms; crabs are incidental food items. During his time here he grew noticeably and put on quite a bit of weight. He was a photographer's dream – never before have I managed full-frame photographs of a whimbrel (Figure 8).

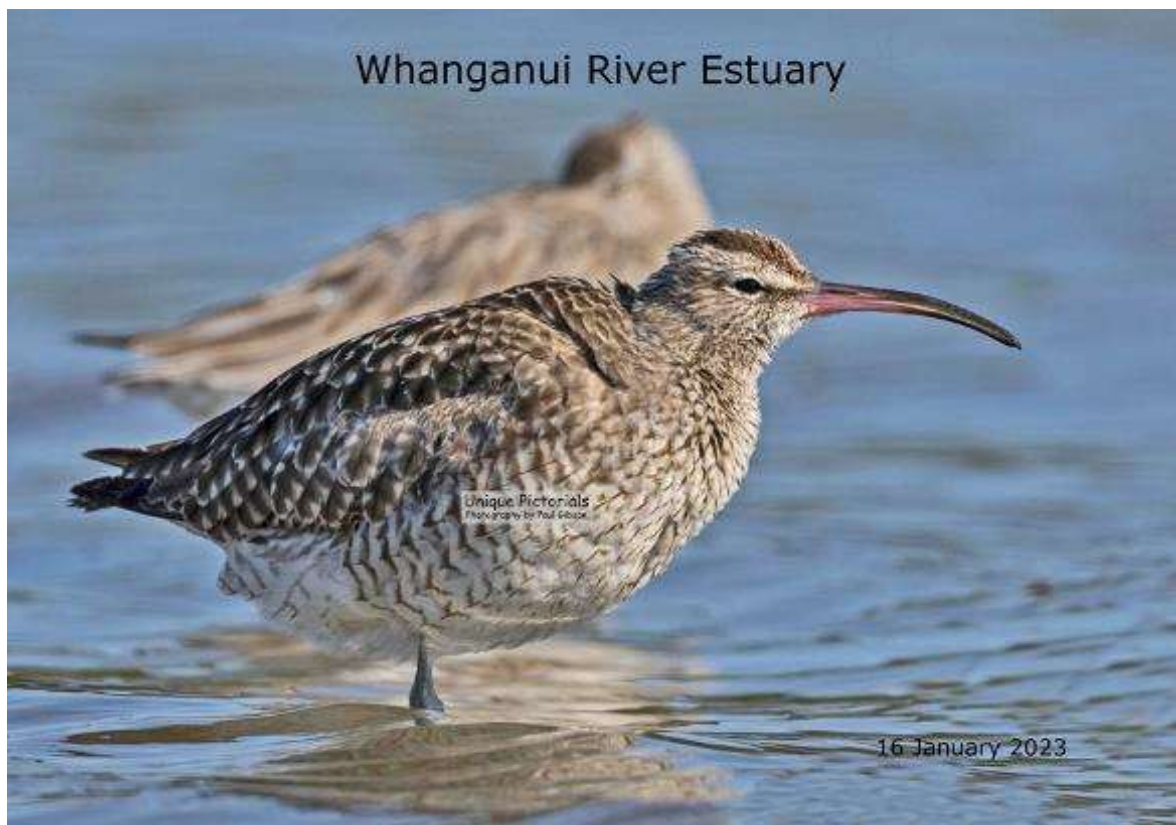


Figure 8. The last photograph taken of the Whimbrel that spent two-and-a-half months on the Whanganui R estuary during the 2022/23 summer (photo credit: Paul Gibson)

Bar-tailed Godwit | Kūaka

Small numbers of godwits are always found during summer, with average numbers varying from 20 to 30. This summer we have had a steady 20 – 24 birds. There is an advantage with small numbers, in that we get to know the birds. We also have unrivalled close access to them. Among these birds, for the last 15 years, has been a male godwit bearing a white leg flag engraved with the letters AJD (a second flagged godwit, YCE, was seen towards the end of January 2023). If we had a thousand godwits, it would be difficult to find AJD every day, but our small numbers enable us to locate him easily. At the time of writing this (early March 2023) he is colouring up nicely in his breeding plumage, ready to depart north on or about 25 March (Figure 9). A year ago, I wrote a book on this bird - *Feats Beyond Amazing – the life story of a bar-tailed godwit*. Often when I am at the river, I find people there looking for AJD, as they have the book, or have heard about him. It gives me quite a thrill. Most locals are not even aware we have international birds on our estuary.



Figure 9. Male Bar-tailed Godwit, AJD, photographed on 4 March 2023 towards the end of his 15th summer stay on the Whanganui R estuary (photo credit: Paul Gibson)

Other Waders and Waterbirds

In addition to the Bar-tailed Godwits and Whimbrel, several other migrant waders have passed through the estuary. These have included small numbers of Wrybill | Ngutu Pare (no more than 1–2), and 1–2 Red Knot | Huahou, most only staying a day or two. Wrybill are inter-island migrants within New Zealand, breeding on braided rivers in the South Island in spring and summer, and wintering in northern estuaries and harbours during the non-breeding season. Their paucity in summer is therefore unsurprising, but numbers passing through Whanganui should pick up in autumn, when the birds move north, and again in late-winter/early-spring, on their way back to their South Island breeding grounds. Red Knot | Huahou, in contrast, are migrants from the northern hemisphere. While here, they feed primarily on small molluscs such as the New Zealand mud snail (*Potamopyrgus antipodarum*), which may not be as abundant here as elsewhere. The knots are probably just passing through to better feeding grounds somewhere else.

Large numbers of Pied Stilt | Poaka visited the estuary during summer, the highest count being 55, recorded in the last week of December 2023. Numbers fluctuate, however, with as few as 2–6 on some days, then 3–4 times that number a week later. Among these larger groups have been many juveniles, identifiable by their greyer upperpart and pink legs, suggesting that 2022/23 was a good breeding season. Given that stilts breed in flooded grasslands and that the past spring and summer have been particularly wet, this upsurge in the proportion of juveniles is understandable.

We regularly see 1–4 Caspian Tern | Taranui in summer, although this year I counted 10 in mid-February. Two of these birds had engraved plastic bands with the letters A40 and J64. Both had been banded at Bell Island, Nelson. A40 was banded in December 2010, and J64 in December 2021, both as nestlings (thanks to David Melville for this information). Given their origin, and past records of colour-banded birds from Nelson being recorded on the Whanganui estuary, it is likely that the 10 birds seen in mid-February were part of the post-breeding dispersal from that region.

Royal spoonbill | Kōtuku Ngutupapa is another inter-island migrant. Numbers recorded during the past summer were generally low, no more than 1–2 birds, almost certainly non-breeders, but there were brief passages of 12–15 spoonbills at the end of January (Lynne Douglas), 20 birds in the second week of February (François Rawlinson, Paul Gibson: Figure 10), and 24 birds in early March (Stephen McGill). During summer most spoonbill are away breeding on the South Island, but as shown here, we see groups passing through, usually staying for no more than a day on their way elsewhere. Larger numbers are expected in the coming months, where in previous years in autumn up to 80 have been seen passing through on their northward migration.



Figure 10. Flock of 20 Royal Spoonbill feeding on the incoming tide on the Whanganui estuary, 9 February 2023. This flock had moved on by the following day. (Photo credit: Paul Gibson)

Other regularly recorded species on the estuary over the past few months have included Black Shag | Māpunga and Pied Shag | Kāruhiruhi, the latter nesting in a small colony at Pūtiki (now 7 nesting pairs, up from 5 a year ago), Black-backed Gull | Karoro (maximum number 325 counted by Steve Purdon in early March, no doubt a post-breeding surge), Red-billed Gull | Tarāpunga (maximum 45 counted by Paul Gibson in mid-February) and White-fronted Tern | Tara (maximum 325 in early March, also counted by Steve Purdon). In addition, Ormond Torr inadvertently photographed a Black-fronted Tern | Tarapirohe on the estuary on 26 February, while Steve Purdon and Peter Fryer reported three at the North Mole on 7 March.

Paul Gibson

Birds at Other Estuaries

Although the Whanganui estuary receives most of the attention when it comes to looking for waders, two other nearby estuaries appear to be as productive, at least in terms of the presence of noteworthy species. This summer, the Whangaehu estuary, 12 km south-east of Whanganui, served as an alternate high-tide roost for the Bar-tailed Godwits and Whimbrel from the Whanganui estuary because there is no longer any suitable refuge for the birds at Whanganui during peak spring tides. On 12 December, Paul Gibson saw the Whimbrel and 19 Bar-tailed Godwits (including AJD) leave the Whanganui estuary just before high tide and fly off south-east. Peter Frost found the same flock roosting at Whangaehu 35 minutes later. Jim Norris observed the same thing about 2 weeks later. Outside these birds, the Whangaehu estuary does not seem to attract Bar-tailed Godwit in any significant numbers.

Most notable among the less common species recorded at Whangaehu was a Pectoral Sandpiper, discovered by Jim Norris on 27 December and photographed by him, Paul Gibson, Peter Frost and Ormond Torr over the next three days (Figure 11). It was associating with two Red Knot | Huahou and a Turnstone. Four other Red Knot were present there in mid-December (Peter Frost). Beyond these northern migrants, the Whangaehu estuary this summer also supported varying numbers of Pied Stilt | Poaka (average 10, range 4-25); Banded Dotterel | Pohowera (average 6, range 1-10); Black-fronted Dotterel (average 9, range 1-20), and even two New Zealand Dotterel | Tūturiwhatu (photographed by Ormond Torr on 30 December). Black-fronted Dotterel are expanding their range westwards along the south coast of the North Island, and the Whangaehu estuary is currently the most westerly site where the species can be reliably found.



Figure 11. Pectoral Sandpiper (right rear) and Red Knot (left foreground) photographed on the Whangaehu estuary 30 December 2023, illustrating the similarity in size of the two species. Note the difference in bill and leg colour and the sharply demarcated patterning on the breast of the Pectoral Sandpiper (photo credit: Ormond Torr)

Koitiata Lagoon, near the mouth of the Turakina R, just 7 km further down the coast from Whangaehu, is another site where both Black-fronted and Banded Dotterel regularly occur. They were recorded there on 7/8 and 6/8 occasions, respectively, on which the lagoon was visited this summer. Both species breed there, with eggs and/or chicks being seen. Phil Smith also found four New Zealand Dotterel

there on 25 January, evidence perhaps of this species' gradual expansion westwards along this coast. The extensive sandy mud flats with their abundance of emergent insects seems particularly favourable to dotterels. In contrast, and rather like the Whangaehu estuary, Koitiata does not seem to support large numbers of northern migrants (Bar-tailed Godwit, Red Knot). Whereas both species do occur occasionally, they are not abundant: maximum number of Bar-tailed Godwits recorded was 15 on 25 January (Phil Smith); only one Red Knot was seen (19 January, Jim Norris); and no Turnstone were recorded, although two had been present for a few weeks in spring.

The coastal region of Whanganui also has several dune lakes, only some of which are accessible to the public, usually for recreation. Unfortunately, this means that they receive generally little sustained attention from local birders, despite the occasional presence of species that are uncommon in the district. One example is a Pacific Golden Plover, reported from the shores of Lake Whiritoa on 5 December by Ray and Pauline Priest. A search for the bird the next day by Jim Norris and Peter Frost found nothing, suggesting that this was a transient individual. Westmere Lake and Virginia Lake Rotokawau are two other accessible waterbodies visited more frequently by birders and photographers. Both are good sites for seeing New Zealand Scaup, with up to 28 being recorded at Westmere by Ray and Pauline Priest on 5 December, and 21 being counted by Stephen McGill at Virginia Lake Rotokawau on 25 January. Several observers reported New Zealand Dabchick from both waterbodies in late-spring/early-summer but none lately. This may be because they become more secretive when breeding. Keegan Miskimmin reported a pair with a nest at Virginia Lake Rotokawau in early January 2023. Neill Haggarty reported a Barbary Dove sitting on a powerline near Westmere on 29 November, but it has not been seen since. It could have been an escape (there are several Barbary Doves in the aviary at Virginia Lake Rotokawau).

Inland Birds

With much of the attention focused on the Nankeen Night-herons and estuarine birds, notable sightings of inland bush and forest birds this summer have been more sporadic. Bushy Park remains the principal drawcard for people wanting to see a wide variety of New Zealand native forest birds, especially endemic ones. Visitors to Bushy Park can usually see Saddleback | Tīeke, Stitchbird | Hīhi and North Island Robin | Toutouwai, with Tīeke being particularly conspicuous and abundant. All three are reintroduced species (North Island Robin in 2001 and 2004, Tīeke in 2006 and Hīhi in 2013, with a top-up reintroduction in 2018) but have become well-established and now breed freely in this fenced sanctuary. Even Whitehead | Pōpokotea, which was only reintroduced in May 2022 seem to be doing well. Although not recorded on every visit, up to six have been seen together. Anyone observing these birds should look to see if they have colour bands. Any without colour bands would be birds that had fledged naturally in the sanctuary, one sign of a successful reintroduction. Despite both their proximity to Bushy Park (whiteheads have been recorded as close as 2 km from the park), and their catholic habitat preference (occurring not only in native forest but also in tall scrub and pine plantations), they are apparently unwilling to cross open areas such as pasture more than a few tens of metres wide, hence the need to reintroduce them.

Whitehead are also commonly heard and seen at Waitahinga, only 7 km inland from Bushy Park. Their abundance probably explains the regular presence of Long-tailed Cuckoo | Koekoeā there in spring and summer. Peter Frost and Stephen McGill heard single birds calling on 14 November and 27 December 2022, respectively, whereas Paul Gibson and Jim Norris recorded a minimum of 6 calling on 13 January 2023. Ormond Torr noted that Long-tailed Cuckoos were everywhere when he went to Waitahinga to photograph them on 20 January, but that after an initial burst of activity they all fell silent. Why there is this concentration of Long-tailed Cuckoo activity at Waitahinga after the end of the breeding season is still a mystery. There is still much to learn.

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?



Shining Cuckoo | Pipīwharau
(Photo credit: Bill Douglas, Whanganui, 24 February 2023)

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