

Northland Toi Toi Wines Bird Atlas Expedition - 28 April to 01 May

By Ian McLean | May 29, 2023



Northland (<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/state/NZ-NTL>), is a region that is much larger than you may think. Many areas are under-surveyed, whilst others have had a good coverage of NZ Bird Atlas counts and in particular the coastal holiday destinations on the east coast such as the Bay of Islands and Whangarei (https://ebird.org/atlasnz/county/NZ-NTL-002?atlasPeriod=EBIRD_ATL_NZ_2019&m=). Atlas counts also tend to be coastal, both on the east & west coasts, whilst the central interior of Northland has had fewer counts. There has also been a tendency by both tourists and local birders to all survey in the same place where certain species are well known e.g. Trounson Kauri Park (<https://ebird.org/hotspot/L521251>), for kiwi-nui/North Island brown kiwi (https://ebird.org/atlasnz/map/nibkiw1?neg=true&env.minX=147.675&env.minY=-49.41317010477388&env.maxX=-156.07500000000005&env.maxY=-29.69098613182705&zh=true&gp=false&ev=Z&excludeExX=false&excludeExAll=false&mr=1-12&bmo=1&emo=12&yr=EBIRD_ATL_NZ_2019), and a limited number of sites around Kaitaia for barn owl (https://ebird.org/atlasnz/map/brnowl?neg=true&env.minX=147.67499999999998&env.minY=-49.41317010477388&env.maxX=-156.07500000000005&env.maxY=-29.69098613182705&zh=true&gp=false&ev=Z&excludeExX=false&excludeExAll=false&mr=1-12&bmo=1&emo=12&yr=EBIRD_ATL_NZ_2019). As a result, there is often an apparent disjunct distribution of certain species e.g. kiwi-nui/North Island brown kiwi are shown as being present at Puketi Forest and Trounson Kauri Park, but not recorded in the Marlborough Forest,

Herekino Forest, Raetea Forest or Ruapekapeka Forest and until our survey, even in the Waipoua Forest. These forests all appear to be good habitat for this species and they are probably there, it is just that no one has been recording sightings in the NZ Bird Atlas. Something to consider the next time you're up north!



Cattle egrets foraging in the rain at Unahi © Trina Smith.

Our quest in Northland was to be one mainly focused on nocturnal counts for kiwi/nui/North Island brown kiwi, [ruru/morepork \(https://ebird.org/atlasnz/map/morepo2?neg=true&env.minX=147.67499999999998&env.minY=-49.41317010477388&env.maxX=-156.07500000000005&env.maxY=-29.69098613182705&zh=true&gp=false&ev=Z&excludeExX=false&excludeExAll=false&mr=1-12&bmo=1&emo=12&yr=EBIRD_ATL_NZ_2019\)](https://ebird.org/atlasnz/map/morepo2?neg=true&env.minX=147.67499999999998&env.minY=-49.41317010477388&env.maxX=-156.07500000000005&env.maxY=-29.69098613182705&zh=true&gp=false&ev=Z&excludeExX=false&excludeExAll=false&mr=1-12&bmo=1&emo=12&yr=EBIRD_ATL_NZ_2019) and barn owl. Our itinerary was ambitious with nocturnal counts centered around three overnight destinations. These were:

1. Whatoro (to explore the Waima, Waipoua and Marlborough Forests in addition to Trounson Kauri Park),
2. Ahipara (to explore Herekino and Raetea Forest and local forest patches & farmland around Kaitaia),
3. and finally Paihia in the Bay of Islands (to explore the Ruapekapeka and Hukerenui Forests).

Our accommodations varied and included motel units and cabins at the Kauri Coast Top 10 Holiday Park and Ahipara Holiday Park, whilst we had the comfort of hotel rooms at the Scenic Hotel Bay of Islands in Paihia. During the daytime, counts were to be made while travelling enroute to our destinations. Realistically we had a lot of ground to cover and it differed from the Gisborne Atlas Expedition in that we did not have a hub to base ourselves for all three nights. However we were able to target a wide variety of habitats to try spread our efforts. Habitats visited included: kauri forest, coastal native forest, pine plantations, regenerating scrub, farmland, salt marsh, mangroves, wetlands, lakeshores, rocky shores, sandy beaches and urban areas.



Pure parera/grey duck (left and right birds) are often seen in Northland and in particular along forested rivers © Heather O'Brien.

Our 12 enthusiastic participants first met at the café of the Matakoho Kauri Museum on the Friday for lunch where we shared our experience of Atlassing and discussed survey protocols. The weather forecast for the weekend was looking grim and after a briefing, we made our way to Dargaville, with pairs and individuals stopping at different locations enroute including Pahi, the Tinopai Peninsula, Pouto Peninsula, Papanui and Wairoa River. Dinner that evening was at the rather grand Northern Wairoa Hotel in Dargaville. Sadly two people had to leave because of illness (before dinner) and we were reduced to 10 people for much of the remaining expedition. After an enjoyable meal, we made our way north to the Kauri Coast Top 10 Holiday Park in Whataroa.



Checking for Banded Rail near Pahi, with mangrove, kauri forest & farmland habitats © Trina Smith.

The nocturnal counts on Friday night found kiwi-nui in two atlas squares in the Waipoua Forest and also at the Kauri Coast Top 10 Holiday Park itself. In these locations kiwi-nui had previously not be recorded, which is fantastic. We also counted kiwi-nui at the well known Trounson Kauri Park site. Our plan to count in the Marlborough Forest (grid square O58) was thwarted by road closure, but we did count ruru in what is one of the least counted bird atlas squares.

On the Saturday, the weather began to deteriorate with strong winds and heavy driving rain becoming worse towards the evening. Locations visited during the day on our way to Ahipara included: Waipoua Forest, Omapere, Rawene, Kohokohu, Panguru, Mitimiti & Herekino. By the evening, strong winds prevented any serious nocturnal counts, although we did visit locations near Awanui & Kaitaia Airport in the hope of finding barn owls but without any success.



Leucistic white-faced heron at Kohukohu Wharf © Rowena West



The rugged coastline of Mitimiti © Trina Smith

By Sunday morning the weather had become severe, with strong winds and driving rain. Surveying was at times very difficult and often resulted in a good soaking! From Ahipara to the Bay of Islands, the locations visited included: Unahi, Lake Ngatu, the Karikari Peninsula, Taipa, Mangonui and Whangaroa. The bad weather unfortunately prevented any nocturnal counts that evening.

On the Monday morning, our participants headed back home towards Whangarei and Auckland. Locations surveyed included: Kawakawa, Ruapekapeka Pa battle site, Lake Waro, Ruakaka and Waipu. The most productive site was the very urban and rather under-vegetated Vinegar Lake stormwater pond in Whangarei. Birds seen at this site included 10 [tokitokipio/Australasian grebe](https://ebird.org/atlasnz/map/ausgre1) (<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/map/ausgre1>), 4 [weweia/New Zealand dabchick](https://ebird.org/atlasnz/map/nezgre1?neg=true&env.minX=145.34042600141098&env.minY=-49.007610480904674&env.maxX=-158.40957399858905&env.maxY=-29.1502436159837&zh=true&gp=false&ev=Z&excludeExX=false&excludeExAll=false&mr=1-12&bmo=1&emo=12&yr=EBIRD_ATL_NZ_2019) (https://ebird.org/atlasnz/map/nezgre1?neg=true&env.minX=145.34042600141098&env.minY=-49.007610480904674&env.maxX=-158.40957399858905&env.maxY=-29.1502436159837&zh=true&gp=false&ev=Z&excludeExX=false&excludeExAll=false&mr=1-12&bmo=1&emo=12&yr=EBIRD_ATL_NZ_2019), and 2 [pateke/brown teal](https://ebird.org/atlasnz/map/brotea1?neg=true&env.minX=145.34042600141098&env.minY=-49.007610480904674&env.maxX=-158.40957399858905&env.maxY=-29.1502436159837&zh=true&gp=false&ev=Z&excludeExX=false&excludeExAll=false&mr=1-12&bmo=1&emo=12&yr=EBIRD_ATL_NZ_2019) (https://ebird.org/atlasnz/map/brotea1?neg=true&env.minX=145.34042600141098&env.minY=-49.007610480904674&env.maxX=-158.40957399858905&env.maxY=-29.1502436159837&zh=true&gp=false&ev=Z&excludeExX=false&excludeExAll=false&mr=1-12&bmo=1&emo=12&yr=EBIRD_ATL_NZ_2019).



Adult and juvenile Australasian little grebes at Vinegar Lake in Whangarei © Trina Smith

Despite the bad weather, the expedition was very productive with 327 checklists submitted and 73 species recorded.

Some birding highlights included:-

- An [matuku-hūrepo/Australasian bittern](https://ebird.org/atlasnz/map/ausbit1) (<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/map/ausbit1>) on the Mangamuka River.
- Two [kotuku/white heron](https://ebird.org/atlasnz/map/greegr?neg=true&env.minX=144.8601641271685&env.minY=-50.07699678623787&env.maxX=-158.88983) (<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/map/greegr?neg=true&env.minX=144.8601641271685&env.minY=-50.07699678623787&env.maxX=-158.88983>)

[58728315&env.maxY=-30.57943828901058&zh=true&gp=false&ev=Z&excludeExX=false&excludeExAll=false&mr=1-12&bmo=1&emo=12&yr=EBIRD_ATL_NZ_2019](https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S135768587)), found along the Wairoa River.

- [One Eurasian coot at Lake Whareiti \(coot are a rarity in Northland\)](https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S135768587). (<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S135768587>).
- [Mātātā/North Island fernbird](https://ebird.org/atlasnz/map/fernbi?neg=true&env.minX=172.44684278261514&env.minY=-36.17652932673175&env.maxX=175.96246778261514&env.maxY=-34.85986157664775&zh=true&gp=true&ev=Z&excludeExX=false&excludeExAll=false&mr=1-12&bmo=1&emo=12&yr=EBIRD_ATL_NZ_2019) (https://ebird.org/atlasnz/map/fernbi?neg=true&env.minX=172.44684278261514&env.minY=-36.17652932673175&env.maxX=175.96246778261514&env.maxY=-34.85986157664775&zh=true&gp=true&ev=Z&excludeExX=false&excludeExAll=false&mr=1-12&bmo=1&emo=12&yr=EBIRD_ATL_NZ_2019), in five locations
- Three [cattle egret](https://ebird.org/atlasnz/map/categr?neg=true&env.minX=172.44684278261514&env.minY=-36.17652932673175&env.maxX=175.96246778261514&env.maxY=-34.85986157664775&zh=true&gp=true&ev=Z&excludeExX=false&excludeExAll=false&mr=1-12&bmo=1&emo=12&yr=EBIRD_ATL_NZ_2019) (https://ebird.org/atlasnz/map/categr?neg=true&env.minX=172.44684278261514&env.minY=-36.17652932673175&env.maxX=175.96246778261514&env.maxY=-34.85986157664775&zh=true&gp=true&ev=Z&excludeExX=false&excludeExAll=false&mr=1-12&bmo=1&emo=12&yr=EBIRD_ATL_NZ_2019), in a new location near Herekino (<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S135363197>).
- One [whiskered tern](https://ebird.org/atlasnz/map/whiter2?neg=true&env.minX=172.03497443590808&env.minY=-36.042302680164035&env.maxX=175.55059943590808&env.maxY=-34.72341866214073&zh=true&gp=true&ev=Z&excludeExX=false&excludeExAll=false&mr=3-5&bmo=3&emo=5&yr=EBIRD_ATL_NZ_2019) (https://ebird.org/atlasnz/map/whiter2?neg=true&env.minX=172.03497443590808&env.minY=-36.042302680164035&env.maxX=175.55059943590808&env.maxY=-34.72341866214073&zh=true&gp=true&ev=Z&excludeExX=false&excludeExAll=false&mr=3-5&bmo=3&emo=5&yr=EBIRD_ATL_NZ_2019), seen at [Lake Ngatu](https://ebird.org/atlasnz/view/checklist/S135511538) (<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/view/checklist/S135511538>). This was the only reportable vagrant species and an [Unusual Bird Report \(UBR\)](https://www.birdsnz.org.nz/schemes/rare-and-vagrant-birds/reportable-species/) (<https://www.birdsnz.org.nz/schemes/rare-and-vagrant-birds/reportable-species/>), will be submitted.

You can view the rest of the effort via our [Trip Report here](https://ebird.org/atlasnz/tripreport/122369) (<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/tripreport/122369>).



(<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/tripreport/122369>).



Scanning Lake Ngatu in the driving rain for whiskered tern © Trina Smith

Thanks to our hardworking group who braved the elements to gather this valuable bird Atlas data.

A huge thanks to: Tony Crocker, Rowena West, Sue Frostick, Noel Knight, Sue Courtney, Jessica Ellery, Derry and Isabella Godbert, Heather O'Brien, Anne McCracken, Trina Smith and Ian McLean for taking part. It was great to share birding knowledge and learn more about using the bird Atlas. Thanks to Dan Burgin from the NZ Bird Atlas for his kind assistance and advice. Thanks to [Toi Toi wines](https://www.toitowines.co.nz/) (<https://www.toitowines.co.nz/>) for their generous sponsorship that made this expedition possible.



[\(https://www.toitowines.co.nz/\)](https://www.toitowines.co.nz/)

Toi Toi Wines, Hawkes Bay Merlot © Ian McLean

I would like to take this opportunity to encourage you all to undertake bird Atlas counts in the Northland region. Many areas are under surveyed and there is so much potential for kiwi-nui, ruru and barn owl detections throughout the habitats there. There may also be unknown relict populations in many of the smaller forests. For example, amazingly there is a known isolated population of tītipounamu/rifleman (<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/map/rifle1>) in the Warawara Forest. Hopefully kiwi-nui/North island brown kiwi are found in far more locations than currently noted on the species map, whilst we need to go looking for barn owl in more locations to accurately track their colonisation. We really need to encourage some individual efforts, whether they be by locals or by birders visiting from elsewhere in New Zealand. If you can, please encourage others to Atlas in Northland and visit yourself.

Ian McLean

The NZ Bird Atlas team would like to thank all those who attended this expedition and helped gather valuable data for this region, even in some horrible weather! A huge thanks to Ian McLean who kindly offered his time and efforts to organise and lead this expedition. Without

him it wouldn't have got off the ground. Finally, as always, a massive thanks to the Toi Toi wines team. These expeditions benefit greatly from the kindly donated funding.



[\(https://www.toitowines.co.nz/\)](https://www.toitowines.co.nz/)

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