



TŌREA PANGO

NELSON BRANCH BIRDS NZ

NEWSLETTER ISSUE 16

January/February 2025

Welcome to the first newsletter for 2025. We hope you have had a great summer of birding, and we look forward to hopefully hearing some of your bird tales and enjoying your photos at one of our monthly meetings. We would be delighted for anyone and everyone to step up to present a talk or share an avian encounter, no matter how big or small 😊

For your diary: our next meeting and AGM is Monday 3 March, 7:15pm at the Headingly Centre in Richmond. Tea/coffee and chat before the meeting starts.

Recent meetings

The December 2024 meeting was a delightful potluck dinner hosted by David and Vicky Melville. Many thanks for hosting us – it was a terrific evening.

The February 2025 meeting was a public talk organised by Paul Fisher at the Putangitangi Centre, featuring moult expert Santiago Guallar.

Bird moult expert Santiago Guallar

Paul Fisher and David Melville hosted Spanish ornithologist Dr Santiago (Santi) Guallar in February, whose travel to New Zealand was sponsored by a Birds NZ Research Grant. Santi works with the Museum of Natural Sciences of Barcelona and the Catalan Ornithological Institute, and has a wide interest in and knowledge of moult.

Santi's thesis was on '*Structure, regulation and evolution of passerine moult*' and his studies include work in Europe and the Neotropics, investigating the evolution of moult strategies and the use of moult to determine the age of birds based on plumage characteristics. Santi (*left in photo, examining a South Island Mātātā Fernbird with Paul*) participated in a moult workshop and training sessions in Nelson and Christchurch – over 90 attended the online workshop and 50 attended Santi's public talk in Nelson.



“Evolution of Bird Moul” – a talk by Santi Guallar

(report by Alison Ballance on Santi’s presentation at our 10 February meeting)

What is bird moult? Moul is the non-accidental, programmed shedding and replacement of plumage.

Fun fact 1. Feathers are inert, but they can change over time because of a bird making cosmetic changes (bathing in iron-rich water that stains or dyes the feathers), wear (the tip of a feather can wear off to reveal a new, different-coloured tip), or through photo-oxidation.

What are the benefits of moult? It replaces old, worn feathers. It allows birds to change between breeding and non-breeding plumage. It allows birds to transition from immature to mature plumage as they age.

Fun fact 2. Feathers make up about 10% of a bird’s mass.

There is a cost to moult. It takes a lot of keratin synthesis (and energy) to make new feathers. Making new feathers takes increased blood flow which causes heat and water loss. While birds are moulting there are gaps in the feathers of their wings and tails, which affects their ability to fly and makes them more prone to predation.

There are different patterns of moult. Some birds like penguins and the swan pictured below have a catastrophic moult and replace all their feathers in one go. While this is happening they can’t fly or swim. Other birds, such as passerines, lose a few feathers at a time so they can carry on with life as usual. For primary feathers on a wing, moult starts from the innermost primary feather and continues to the outer edge.

PROCESS COMPONENTS

- feather-growth rate
- intensity
- sequence

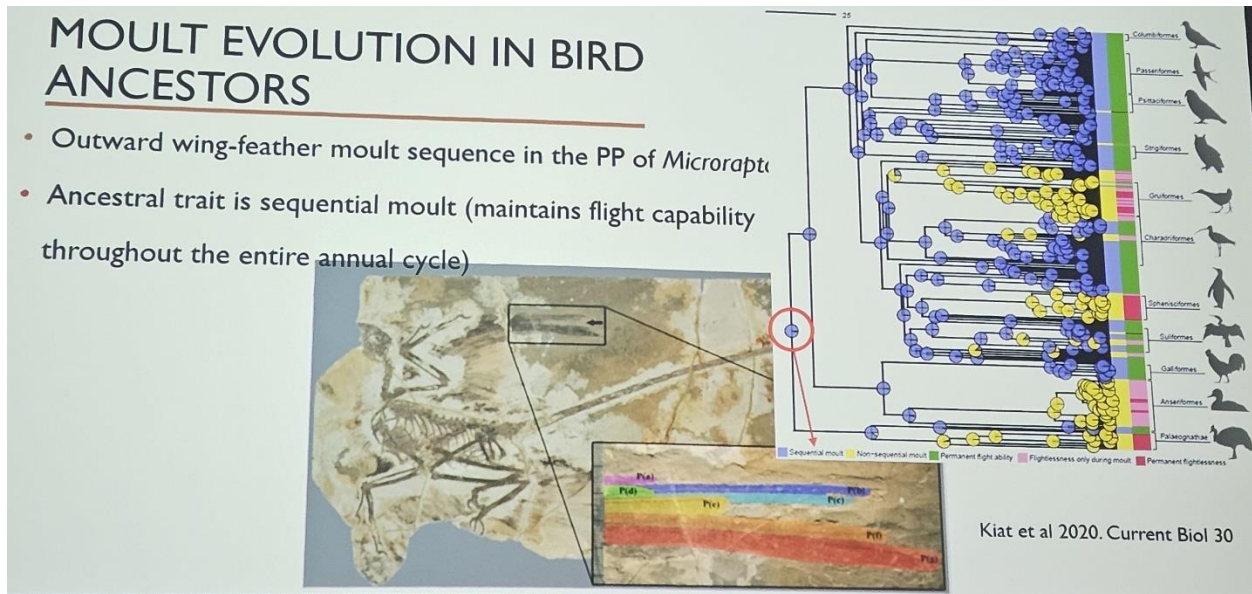


The image is a composite of three photographs. The top-left photo shows a single feather with a vertical scale from 1 to 10. The top-right photo shows a person handling a swan's wing. The bottom photo shows a close-up of a wing with arrows pointing to different feather groups, labeled 'high intensity non-sequential' and 'medium intensity consecutive sequence outward'.

Fun fact 3. Longer feathers grow faster. Growth rate and size scale allometrically.

One versus two moults a year. Many birds moult once a year, but migratory species often moult twice a year. For example, Arctic waders such as godwits which make long migrations between breeding and overwintering feeding grounds have pre- and post-breeding moults. This ensures their feathers are in good nick for those two long flights between the southern and northern hemispheres.

When and why did moult evolve? This is Santi's major interest, and is a very recent area of research (just 53 scientific papers in the past 20 years). There are only a few fossils, including a *Microraptor* (an ancestor of modern birds) undergoing wing feather moult. Some of the best examples of ancient feathers are preserved in amber. Moult is governed by genes so there has been research looking at the genetics and evolution of moult strategies across different families of birds.



Climate change is affecting the timing of moult. Birds can respond quickly to warming temperatures by changing the timing of their moult. Research shows significantly earlier pre-breeding moult – by up to 20 days – over just 4 decades i.e. in some spring-breeding species moult timing has moved one day earlier every 2 years! This allows them to respond to earlier insect emergence. In an interesting twist, some birds delayed starting their winter moult by up to 30 days to take advantage of a longer summer food supply and squeeze in another clutch.



Birds Nelson Facebook group

If you are not already a member, this group is well worth checking out for great photos and information:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/441307714899123/>

Keeping a camera focused on Motueka Sandspit and elsewhere *by David Melville*

Christine Grove has been tireless in photographing and recording marked shorebirds at Motueka Sandspit, as well as forays further afield. This has resulted in reports of 'regular' visitors – such as Bar-tailed Godwit ORANGE "AKA" – originally banded on 11 February 2012 as an adult at Rhyll, Philip Island, Victoria. It has never been seen at Rhyll since it was banded, but is a regular at Motueka (over 20 sightings) and there are 3 sightings of it at Yalujiang National Nature Reserve in north-east China (by David Melville). The flag has now faded to a light peach colour.

During a visit to the "Gobi" at Farewell Spit on 21 January Christine photographed Bar-tailed Godwit W4RYBY – Jesse Conklin noted: "Cool! To my knowledge 4RYBY disappeared from Foxton in 2021 as a non-migrant youngster and hasn't been seen since."

Another good find was Black-billed Gull with WHITE band 'T88'. Mike Bell says: "A 2014 Wairau chick, which bred every year at the Wairau until 2019 when it disappeared. Then it popped back up in 2023 at Mot Estuary (a photo from you, Christine) and now this sighting. I spent a heap of time at the Wairau colony this last breeding season, and never saw it, so suspect that it has shifted rivers and is breeding elsewhere now. Brilliant bird!"

Photos are also proving to be a great way of recording the small flags that Bart Kempenaers's team from the Max Planck Institute are putting on Banded Dotterels.

Well done Christine!

A banded Banded Dotterel *by Paula Wilkinson*



Paula Wilkinson posted this photo on the Birds Nelson Facebook page on 4 February 2025. It was taken in the Motueka Estuary, and shows a metal leg band, a white leg flag and the long whip aerial of a small tracking device on the Pohowera Banded Dotterel's back. It is one of the birds marked in late 2024 by a team of researchers from the Max Planck Institute.

Wader watching

In newsletter editor Paul Bennett's last Sept/Oct newsletter he mentioned that the Kuaka Bar-tailed Godwits had just returned. Well, time flies and the Kuaka are beginning to fatten up and change into breeding plumage ahead of next month's return to the Arctic for breeding. Now is a great time to get out and admire them – find them in high tide roosts across Nelson, Tasman and Golden Bay: Boulder Bank Drive near the sewage treatment plant (get in a spot of wetland bird viewing on the ponds at the same time), on the Motueka sand spit (join one of our Birds NZ monthly trips or make your own way from the golf club end of Staples Street), Marahau Estuary, the base of Farewell Spit (walk a few kilometres along the beach to the area known as the Gobi) and Westhaven Inlet, to name just a few of the bigger, more easily accessible sites. In Tasman Bay and at Farewell Spit, you'll see other Arctic waders such as Huahou Red Knots and Ruddy Turnstones, and there are always plenty of endemic waders such as Pohowera Banded Dotterels and Tōrea South Island Pied Oystercatchers.

Pohowera Banded Dotterels in flight by Rebecca Bowater



*"A flock of Banded Dotterels flying near the Boulder Bank Nelson yesterday. Unusual to see a flock here."
(posted by Rebecca on Birds Nelson Facebook on 15 Feb 2025.)*

Mātātā Fernbird update

While Santi Guallar was in Nelson he joined David Melville, Craig Martin and others helping Paul Fisher with his South Island Mātātā Fernbird research at Pearl Creek, Wakapuaka Flats, Sandy Bay, Marahau and Delaware. Paul reports that thirteen new birds were colour banded; 10 were juveniles from this year. A further six Mātātā were also recaptured, some in their 3rd+ year and assessed for moult. No Mātātā were found at three Delaware saltmarsh sites where five juvenile birds were banded last year and one other bird seen; their absence is most likely from predation some time over the last six months, despite a local Forest and Bird rat and stoat trapping programme.

Gull-billed Terns on Bell Island shell bank *by David Melville (reported 2 January 2025)*

"A pair of Australian [Gull-billed] Terns have successfully fledged two young in Waimea Inlet, Tasman District. The first attempt in mid-October failed when the egg was lost (apparently washed out). The birds (presumably the same pair) laid again in late October/early November, and very young chicks were present on 28 November. Three chicks were seen, but one was found dead on 22 December with a puncture wound to the breast - possibly from an attack by a Caspian Tern[?]. The remaining two chicks were seen flying on 26 December. Both young were seen on 30 December but none were present on 1 January 2025. Young terns usually remain dependent on adults for food for a prolonged period of time so keep a lookout for the family. Interestingly, a third "adult" was present periodically throughout the nesting period - early on it had only a partial black cap and appeared to be an immature, but later was indistinguishable from the breeding pair."



Gull-billed Terns with juvenile - photo by Steve Wood, late December 2024 (info and photo from Birds Nelson Facebook page)

Australian Wood Duck update

Rob Jones and Sharen Graham report lots of action around the Australian Wood Duck nest boxes on Playhouse Road, with Wood Ducks AND Pūtangitangi Paradise Shelducks both laying eggs in two of the boxes. In one box, Australian Wood Ducks incubated both sets of eggs. Pūtangitangi eggs hatch a week earlier than wood duck eggs (3 versus 4-week incubation), so the wood duck eggs failed after the incubating pair left with the 3 Pūtangitangi chicks which successfully hatched. The chicks survived 5 days but were attacked by a pair of adult shelducks which may have led to their disappearance. Two other clutches of wood duck eggs (5 and 6 eggs) failed to hatch, but a family group with 4 chicks were reported nearby. A count will be made when the birds regroup into a large winter flock.

Summer Spoonbills

Jenny Edwards has been coordinating an informal summer survey for Kōtuku ngutupapa Royal Spoonbill breeding behaviour. Here is an update emailed from Jenny on 30 January 2025.

“While we haven't spotted any nesting or breeding behaviours this summer, we have certainly been keeping our eyes out for spoonbills! As usual for a summer period, they've been seen in various numbers around the place, feeding on the tidal flats and roosting on trees and logs in between times.

Here's a summary of reports that came in after my last email:

- up to 12 in the pine tree off Motueka Marina
- about 40 at the Bell Island shellbank on 15 December
- regular sighting of between 8 and 18 at the northern mouth of the Aorere, and a sighting of 41 near Collingwood a few days ago.
- sporadic sightings of several birds feeding on the Stoke side of the Inlet
- up to 10 seen feeding in the Nelson Haven and 5 at Delaware Bay
- 22 roosting on a log at the Riwaka Sandbar on 1 Jan”

Pīpīwharauoa Shining Cuckoo chick and foster parent *by Sean McGrath*



“A hungry pīpīwharauoa (shining cuckoo) being fed tiny bugs by riroriro (grey warbler) foster parents yesterday in the Brook Waimārama Sanctuary.” (posted by Sean McGrath on Birds Nelson Facebook on 10 Jan 2025)

Update on surveys for signs of avian influenza among Australasian Gannets from Farewell Spit – February 2025 by Rob Schuckard and David Melville

Since August 2024, Birds New Zealand is on a monthly basis monitoring Australasian Gannets at Farewell Spit Nature Reserve for signs of High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza (HPAI) H5N1.

In July 2024 an Australasian Gannet with dark eyes was photographed off southwest Australia. Studies of Northern Gannets in Scotland have suggested that birds with dark eyes have been exposed to HPAI – this bird presented a conundrum since, so far, no sign of HPAI has been detected among wild birds in New Zealand or Australia.

Members of Birds NZ Nelson initiated a monitoring program for dead seabirds at Farewell Spit, and looking for possible signs of avian influenza by checking for birds that have black irises. In addition, we follow the progress of the breeding season at the gannet colony and read band combinations from birds banded at an earlier stage. Gannet banding at Farewell Spit happened between 1994-2003 and between 2012-2016.



Banded Australasian Gannet by Jenny Edwards

Having a population marked with readable bands will facilitate assessing mortality if (when) HPAI arrives in New Zealand and we have been catching and banding birds since September 2024. So far, we have recorded 4-5 birds with black irises, of which two have been banded with readable RED bands. About 121 gannets have been banded with readable YELLOW bands. Included in the 121 birds were 21 previously banded birds. The oldest birds in the colony are two that were banded as nestlings in the 1994/95 breeding season.

In collaboration with Otago University, about 30 oropharyngeal and cloacal swabs have been collected to establish baseline information about viruses that are present in Australasian Gannets prior to the arrival of HPAI.



Te Tau Ihu Top of the South wader survey – winter 2024 to summer 2025

Rob Schuckard coordinates a team of wader counters across Tasman Bay, Golden Bay and Farewell Spit, who conduct a census of shorebirds at coastal high tide roosts three times a year. Here are the last year’s numbers:

	TOTAL	MIGRATORY WADERS	% OF TOTAL	ENDEMIC WADERS	% OF TOTAL
June 2024	16,670	3,672	22%	12,998	78%
November 2024	31,252	26,818	86%	4,433	14%
February 2025	54,608	32,020	59%	22,588	41%

The basic pattern is that winter is dominated by New Zealand species such as oystercatchers. In spring these endemics migrate to breeding areas in New Zealand, often inland, as Arctic waders start to arrive. And in summer the full cohort of migratory waders is here, while endemic birds have finished breeding and returned to winter feeding areas. Similar counts are conducted across the whole country.



Rare bird sightings from November 2024

Rebecca Bowater photographed a Common Tern on the Boulder Bank.

A Eurasian whimbrel was a regular sight in front of the [Taupata bird hide](#) near Puponga.

Steve Wood photographed an American Golden Plover and a Black-tailed Godwit on the Bell Island shell bank.

Steve also had this to report from the 17 November spring wader survey on Farewell Spit ([posted on BirdingNZ.net](#)):

“Pectoral sandpiper 1

Lesser Sand Plover (*Siberian sand plover*) 1

Greater Sand Plover 1

Sanderling 1

Red necked Stint 4

Whimbrel 2

Plus - Due to a beach wrecked Sperm whale, I counted 51 Northern Giant Petrels seen in a 2.5 hr sea watch. The birds were coming from the west, flying up the stink trail from the whale in ones and twos. They got to within 20 meters of the whale which was 50m up the beach and then peeled off back out to sea. No feeding on the whale was observed apart from some Black-backed Gulls.

The main highlight was one, or possibly two Wilson’s storm Petrels. Hard to believe, but they also came up the beach for a look and then headed out to sea. 10 mins later, another W. stormy arrived but could have been the same original bird that returned.”



Your committee needs you!

Mark Ayre has moved back to Wanaka and stepped down from his role as our Regional Rep. Thank you Mark, for your energy and enthusiasm. Mark will stay on as a Birds NZ councillor at national level, but we are looking for a new Regional Rep for Nelson/Tasman. Your role will largely be liaison between national office and the local area, including attending the annual meeting of reps at the Birds NZ conference, and there is a supportive committee who will help with organising meetings and local events etc. Contact the Nelson Branch for more info: birds.nelson@birdsnz.org.nz

Annette Cunningham is going to step up as our new treasurer, taking over from Paul Fisher. Many thanks for all your work, Paul, and welcome Annette.

Committee contacts

- Kathryn Richards [0273515428] Vice Chair
- Alison Ballance [0277045739]
- Sharen Graham [0276112531]
- Paul Bennett [027454520] Newsletter Editor
- Pete Gaze [0274500179] Meeting speakers
- Rob Schuckard [0274518461] Scientist and Font of Wader Bird Knowledge
- David Melville [0221500237] Scientist and Encyclopaedia of Birds NZ

Baby Kākāriki Karaka Orange-fronted Parakeets by Sean McGrath



“My favourite time of the year in the Brook Waimārama Sanctuary - baby season! Some hungry kākāriki karaka nestlings being fed at their nest entrance yesterday as they get ready for the freedom that their wings will bring them.” (posted by Sean McGrath on Birds Nelson Facebook on 22 Jan 2025)

Regular Branch Activities

MONTHLY MEETINGS

Monthly meetings are held at the Headingly Centre, Richmond starting at 7.15pm and ending 9pm on the first Monday of each month (unless it is a public holiday). Details emailed to members in advance.

FIELD TRIPS

Regular Motueka Sandspit trips are an ideal opportunity to meet like-minded people, hone your birding skills and get some exercise! The trips are scheduled for Saturdays to enable more people to participate, with high tide around mid-day. Meet at the car park at the north end of Motueka Quay Road, by the golf course. You may get wet feet. All welcome. Dates are in the schedule.

WADER COUNT

Wader counts are organised three times a year February, June/July and November. If you would like to participate, please email Rob Schuckard: rschckrd@xtra.co.nz



WADER CATCHING and BANDING

The branch periodically arranges catching and banding of waders. The schedule includes many possible catch dates, but this is to allow for cancellation due to bad weather, sites being inaccessible etc. Contact David Melville:

david.melville@xtra.co.nz

LEFT: This Kuaka Bar-tailed Godwit was caught as part of a Max Planck Institute research [project](#) into how birds sleep during their epic non-stop migrations from Alaska to New Zealand. Photo: Michelle Bradshaw

If you have something to contribute to a future newsletter please email editor Paul Bennett
thebraveryofbeingoutofrange@gmail.com

In the meantime, cheers everyone from acting newsletter editor Alison Ballance

2025 Nelson Branch – Upcoming Events and Activities			
March			
1	Saturday	Motueka Sandspit trip - Paul Griffiths	Meet 1030h Motueka Golf Course
3	Monday	BirdsNZ monthly meeting– AGM	Headingly Centre, Richmond 19:15h
15 or 16 March	Saturday or Sunday	Marlborough Sounds small boat birding trip with Mike Bell to Blumine Island and additionally, weather permitting, a lap around Long Island, and landing on Matoroa.	Maximum 10 participants. Please use this link to the sign-up sheet if you are interested.
28-29		Gannet Survey 2024-25	rschckrd@xtra.co.nz
April			
7	Monday	BirdsNZ monthly meeting	Headingly Centre, Richmond 19:15h
19	Saturday	Motueka Sandspit trip - Paul Griffiths	Meet 1200h Motueka Golf Course
May			
5	Monday	BirdsNZ monthly meeting	Headingly Centre, Richmond 19:15h
31	Saturday	Motueka Sandspit trip - Paul Griffiths	Meet 13:00h Motueka Golf Course
31	Saturday	BirdsNZ Annual Conference Auckland	
June			
1	Sunday	BirdsNZ Annual Conference Auckland	
2	Monday	BirdsNZ Annual Conference Auckland	
9	Monday	BirdsNZ monthly meeting	Headingly Centre, Richmond 19:15h
14	Saturday	Motueka Sandspit trip	Meet 10:30h Motueka Golf Course
27	Friday	Winter wader count	Contact Rob Schuckard: rschckrd@xtra.co.nz
28	Saturday	Winter wader count	Contact Rob Schuckard: rschckrd@xtra.co.nz
29	Sunday	Winter wader count	Contact Rob Schuckard: rschckrd@xtra.co.nz