

KUAKA



Welcome to the newsletter of the South Auckland Branch of Birds NZ

Te Kahui Matai Manu o Aotearoa

Issue 68 – JUNE 2025

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Tena koutou *Kuaka* readers.

On the L we have a very active matuku moana/reef heron – with rather large wings (Photo from Kate).

On the R we have a painting by Don Binney entitled 'Pastoral Te Henga'. We have a short feature on Binney's work in this newsletter.

**Our next meeting will be on Tuesday
8th July at 7.30pm**

This month we have some interesting reading for you on matuku, 'fluffy green ping pong balls', and a couple of NZ ornithologists.

If you have any suggestions for future topics do let us know. Photos are also welcome.

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PROGRAMME FOR 2025

Monthly Meetings: held on the second Tuesday of each month, at the Papakura Croquet Club, 1 Chapel Street Papakura. Meetings start at 7:30. Visitors welcome. \$3.00 donation to cover costs please

Jul 8	Monthly meeting	Eric Spurr speaking on bird population trends on Rangitoto and Motutapu islands.
Aug 12	Monthly meeting	
Sep 9	Monthly meeting	



SPEAKER FOR JUNE

This month our member Bartek, shared with us his four months of observing matuku/bittern near Woodhill, on the Kaipara. Thanks Bartek for the use of your photos in this issue of Kuaka.

His viewing spot was the car on the side of the road, overlooking a paddock of rough pasture and drains with raupo. The drains and paddock were wet from late winter/spring rain. Bartek noted that the drains and wet paddocks had plenty of tuna/eel, frogs, worms, and other prey, ideal for the bittern.



There wasn't a lot of cover for the manu, but despite this Bartek often had to sit for a long time before he spotted a matuku. Bartek would arrive just before dawn and often heard the male booming, and it was the male he first saw. A male is identified by the blue colouring on its face.

The photo on the L shows the male as he moves out in the open. Note the size of his feet and the large claw on the right foot.

This individual moved around quite freely in the paddock, although it could be hard to spot as he often stood still for several minutes.

His primary activity appeared to be catching eels.

Stalking quietly through the long grass and reeds the manu would freeze once positioned above his potential prey, then strike, grabbing it just behind the head.

Then the process of swallowing it would begin and could take up to 10 mins to be finally consumed.



It was to be a month before the female was spotted. She was much more reserved than the male, skulking between patches reeds. Crouching down to freeze if a vehicle passed by on the road.

The female, left, is lighter coloured than the male, more slender, and lacking the big neck muscle feature of the male, right.



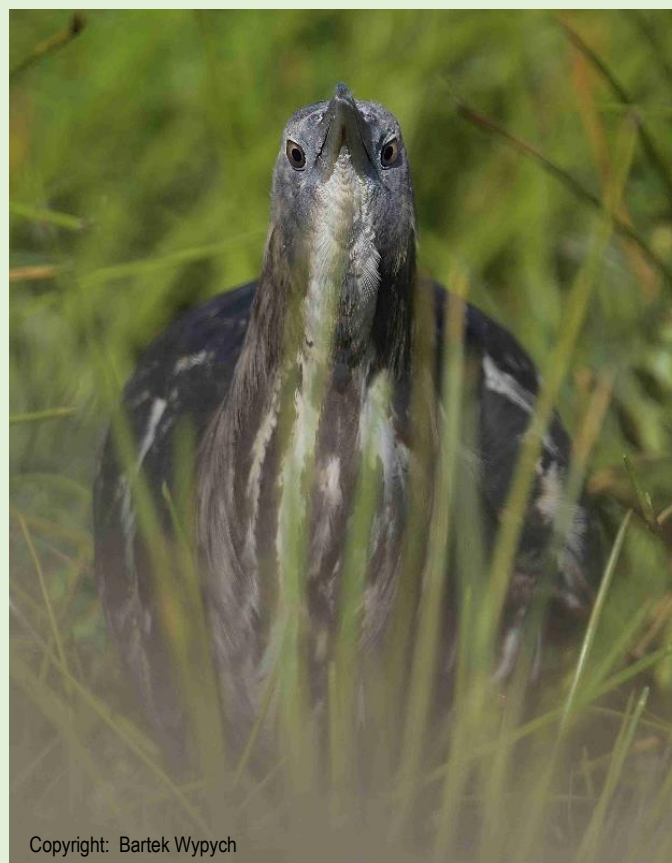
Bartek managed to observe the male booming on several occasions and caught it on film and video, including while booming.



On the left the male is taking in breaths preparatory to booming. On the right he is booming

Bartek did not observe any nesting by the female, and no chicks were seen. The owner of the property did say that in the previous year he had found a juvenile dead on the road, killed by collision with a car.

The area eventually dried out and the paddock was mown – the manu were no longer seen, end of project.





Love Bittern

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Send us your email address if you would like to be included in our Bittern Bulletin once a quarter -

The next Bulletin has ---

- >best practice guide for predator control in Bittern habitats,
- >introduction to our on-land series, how people of the land can make a real difference to help save Bittern from extinction.
- >tips on making ponds/lakes/pools Bittern Friendly
- >what's in our 'lets learn about Bittern' pack for schools and educators (due to be released in Sept)
- > our travel plans to support communities in the regions from August to December and what's on offer.
- >important dates like **The Great Matuku Muster 2025!** and how to get involved.

email lovebittern@gmail.com to be included :)

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RR REPORT

At our June meeting, Bartek Wypych showed some excellent photos and video of a pair of matuku that he monitored over a few months, and had some interesting observations on their behaviour. Some of the photos showed the male catching eels. It prompted me to go back and look at an old bird book I picked up at the Christchurch convention a few years back. “New Zealand Bird Portraits” was first published in 1963, and contains photos and text from field observations of a number of species made by Dr. M.F. Soper. The first chapter covers his observation of a bittern nest and concludes with the following interesting snippet:

“The Bittern has a very specialised form of preening known as ‘powder-puffing’. In this, ‘powder down’ from the breast is spread over head and neck where the feathers are smeared with the slime gathered during fishing and the subsequent regurgitation for the chicks, the powder absorbing the slime and making the cleaning process easier. We had great hopes of witnessing this, but though we saw the Bittern preening on a number of occasions – a performance that would take a leisurely hour and a half – not once did she ‘powder-puff’.”

Over the past weekend, I participated in the Coromandel and Firth of Thames wader censuses. Following the heavy rain we’ve been having recently, many birds had left their usual beach roosts to feed in sodden paddocks – especially SIPO, VOC, godwit and NZ dotterel. Several other participants also commented that some of the species they expected to see were either absent or in a different place to normal.

Driving down the Thames coast on Saturday, I enjoyed a brief spell of blue sky and sunshine over calm seas. Stopping at Tapu to look for shorebirds, I was treated to the spectacular sight of thousands of fluttering shearwater close inshore, the first time I had seen this. They rested on the surface for a while before moving en-masse to a new spot, presumably following fish.

Happy birding, Sue



SIGHTINGS

- A lone cattle egret in amongst a kuaka/godwit flock in Pukorokoro/Miranda
- A skua was spotted at Kawakawa Bay
- Nankeen night heron spotted at Oputere
- Kaka have been heard/seen In Pukekohe and Whiriwhiri
- 226 taranui/Caspian terns were seen on the Pukorokoro/Miranda stilt ponds last week
- Gull billed tern near Pukorokoro/Miranda
- A Kawau tikitiki/spotted shag fitted with a transmitter was photographed on the Firth. Turns out this was the last tikitiki, part of the GPS tracking project coordinated by Matt Rayner from the Museum, still with an active transmitter but close look at the photos showed the harness was very worn and likely to fall off soon.



ROBERT FALLA AWARD

At the recent BirdsNZ AGM and Conference in Auckland, Dr Tim Lovegrove who has talked to our branch a few times over the years, was presented with a Robert Falla Award. The award recognises individuals who have significantly contributed to both BirdsNZ and to NZ ornithology in general.

Robert Falla (1901-1979) was an interesting character. After school he pursued his dream of going to sea for a few years in various jobs, but then started to follow his interest in ornithology, first through part-time study at Auckland University College, and then at Auckland Training College, a training institution for teachers. He transferred to Auckland University from where he graduated in 1924.

Robert was assistant zoologist with the British, Australian and New Zealand Antarctic Research Expedition under Douglas Mawson 1929–1931. He was the founding president of the Ornithological Society of NZ in 1940, and was involved in the organisation of the wartime subantarctic Cape Expedition coastwatching programme of 1941–1945. In 1947 he lead the Snares Islands expedition to study subantarctic birds.

He held positions in various New Zealand museums including director of Canterbury Museum from 1937 to 1947, and director of the Dominion Museum, from 1947 until 1966. Robert was a member of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (RAOU), and president 1951–1952. In the 1973 New Year Honours, Falla was appointed a Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire, for services to conservation.

Source: Wikipedia (abridged)

DON BINNEY 1940-2012

Here are some examples of bird paintings by Don Binney. They may pique your interest sufficiently to take a look at his works on-line. If you know of any other bird artists, do let us know so we can feature them in a later issue of Kuaka.



Well known for his bird paintings, many of Binney's works also depict the West Coast of Auckland, Northland, and feature sea and sky. The birds that materialised on Binney's early canvases were the pīpīwharau, kererū, pīwakawaka, tūi and kōtare to whose distinctive forms he paid tribute.

Before long there existed an archetypal Binney: a canvas featuring a bird suspended over an abstracted New Zealand landform. These paintings were boldly graphic, memorable and modern. Binney created a productive synergy between ornithology and painting.

One of the ways Binney creates such a powerful visual image is by playing off the similarities and differences between bird and the landscape. Both are reduced to strong graphic elements, bold lines, and areas of colour.

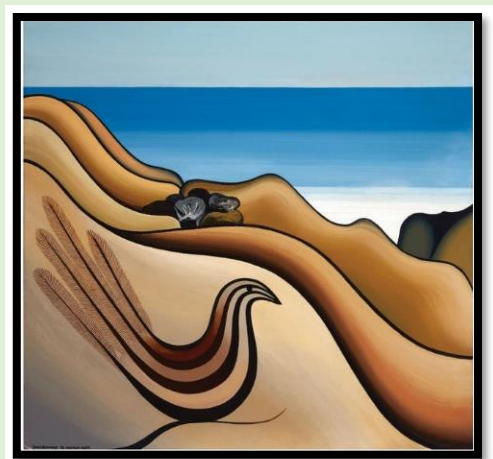
In a 1983 interview, Binney explained how his works link to ornithology: "I think a characteristic of this, ... is the structural coordination of bird and land form Physical resonance between one shape and the other. Why? Because as an ornithologist I've always been thoroughly involved in the way in which land, the environment the creature lives in, modifies the creature. The creature also of course modifies the land: its symbiosis really, isn't it?"



Tui flying above a Mt Eden Villa
1965



Pacific frigate bird
1968



Summer fernbird 11
1966

FLUFFY GREEN PINGPONG BALLS: FIVE FACTS ABOUT TITIPOUNAMU

Described as a “marshmallow on legs”, titipounamu/rifleman, along with the piwauwau/rock wren, are the surviving species of endemic wren in NZ. The other five species from this ancient family are extinct due to predation by introduced mammals. One of these species, the bush wren, became extinct around 1972 and is one of the most recent New Zealand birds to become extinct.

We already know titipounamu are adorable, so what else makes them special?



They are our smallest endemic bird and are similar in size to a golf ball (the equally small riroriro has a longer tail). Males weigh 6 g and females 7g; about the weight of a sheet of paper (5 g). Of all our endemic birds, they lay the smallest eggs. Over the period of a week, a female will lay 2-5 little white eggs, each weighing about 1.5 g which is almost a quarter of her weight. Egg production demands a lot of energy, so males provide extra food for the female to keep her well-fed during this time.



Once common throughout NZ, their distribution is now patchy due to predation and forest fragmentation. These manu are mainly found in higher altitude forests in both the North and South Islands. Titipounamu are relatively poor flyers with a limited capability to fly across open ground. This means that once titipounamu are extinct in a certain area, new birds aren't able to fly there to re-establish a population.

Titipounamu form life-long monogamous pair-bonds and only replace a mate if one of the pair dies. When a pair breed, both parents are responsible for building the nest, incubating the eggs and feeding their chicks. They live in cooperative groups and it's common for others to help feed the nestlings. These helpers can be older siblings from previous broods or they can be completely unrelated to the nestlings. It is thought these unrelated, often male, helpers gain opportunities to find a mate as a result.

The titipounamu call is so high-pitched that it is inaudible for some people. Both sexes produce these calls which have been described as high-pitched squeaky 'zipt', chuck, or 'pip'. When they forage for insects with their mates, they keep in contact by frequently calling to each other.

Both the English and Te Reo Māori names refer to the male's green colouring. The Te Reo Māori name 'titipounamu' is a combination of two words: 'tītiti', meaning 'a mirage of', and 'pounamu' meaning greenstone. This name refers to both the bird's green colouring and the way it zips around quickly. Only the males are green; females are a brownish yellow. The name 'rifleman' refers to the green military jackets that British infantry soldiers wore in the 19thC.



Source: Predator Free NZ, December 2021, Ruby Renwick (abridged)

Image credits: Melissa Boardman

NZ DOTTEREL MINDERS NEWSLETTER



Some highlights from the June edition

Thank you to everyone who submitted breeding reports for the 2024/25 season. We received data from 42 sites, where a total of 172 pairs of tuturiwhatu/dotterel were monitored throughout the breeding season. From these, at least 76 chicks were observed to have fledged. This marks the second highest number of pairs recorded, although breeding productivity (0.44) was slightly lower than last year.

Reported reasons for nest failures varied, including egg, chick, and adult predation (by both mammalian pests and native predators), disturbance from humans and off-leash dogs, nest trampling, high tides, habitat degradation (which has made some sites unsuitable for nesting), but also this season dry conditions affecting food availability. Some sites, however, saw particularly strong outcomes. Wenderholm and Tāwharanui both reported excellent results, with 12 chicks fledging at each location from 4 pairs at Wenderholm and 14 pairs at Tāwharanui.

Dotterel conservation efforts across the North Island are showing encouraging results. In Taranaki, the local tuturiwhatu population has grown from just one or two individuals 30 years ago to around 50 birds today, including 15 breeding pairs. A particularly exciting development was the appearance of JAM, banded at Bethells Beach (Te Henga), who turned up in Taranaki and successfully raised chicks. This highlights how protection efforts in one region can positively impact populations elsewhere.

If you have any interesting NZ dotterel observations, updates or photos you would like to share with the group, please send them through to

ben.parris@aucklandcouncil.govt.nz



Tuturiwhatu with sandhopper.

Photo by Shaun Lee.

Thanks for reading Kuaka issue #68, JUNE 2025

If you would like to contribute to our newsletter - whether you just want to supply a drawing or photo, or maybe even an article or two – just drop an email to the editor.

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