

Manawatū-Whanganui rivers support internationally significant shorebird populations

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A recent survey of the braided rivers of the Manawatū-Whanganui region has revealed internationally-significant breeding populations of pohowera / banded dotterels, black-fronted dotterels and poaka / pied stilts. Supported by a grant from the Birds New Zealand Research Fund, seven Birds New Zealand members walked, kayaked and swam 486 km of rivers in the Manawatū-Whanganui region in October-November 2024, conducting census counts of riverbed-nesting shorebirds.

A total of 509 adult pohowera / banded dotterels were counted during the survey, representing 2.7% of the estimated global population of this species. The Rangitīkei and Manawatū rivers were found to support the 13th and 14th largest individual river breeding populations of pohowera / banded dotterels out of over 120 rivers that have now been surveyed nationwide.

The survey has also revealed these rivers are a national stronghold for black-fronted dotterels. A total of 806 black-fronted dotterels were counted, representing 31% of the estimated national population. Despite having only colonised New Zealand 70 years ago, black-fronted dotterels are now the most abundant and widespread dotterel species in the Manawatū-Whanganui region.

Tōrea / South Island pied oystercatchers have also been breeding in the Manawatū-Whanganui region since at least the late 1990s, and 55 birds were counted during this survey representing two-thirds of all of the birds breeding in the North Island. A red-flagged SIPO spotted on the Pohangina River was revealed to have been caught and banded near Thames in June 2021, indicating that at least some of the SIPO breeding in the lower North Island undertake annual migrations to the harbours of the upper North Island.

These shorebird counts have revealed that the Rangitīkei, Manawatū and Oroua Rivers all qualify to be recognised as Wetlands of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention, as each support >1% of the global or national population of pohowera / banded dotterels, black-fronted dotterels and poaka / pied stilts. These results have been shared with Horizons Regional Council and will be used to fine-tune river management activities that pose a risk to riverbed-nesting shorebirds.

This survey completes a series of shorebird census counts that have been carried out along almost 2,000 km of the lower North Island's rivers and coastline since 2017, revealing a near-complete picture of the distribution and abundance of shorebirds in this part of the country. Over 3,700 complete 'travelling checklists' have been submitted to the New Zealand eBird database as a result of these surveys, and papers describing the abundance and distribution of shorebirds in the lower North Island will be published in *Notornis* in due course.



*Survey team member Christopher Tuffley counting shorebirds on the Ohau River.
Image credit: Lorraine Cook*



*SIPO nest found on the Rangitikei River.
Image credit: Emma Gregg*