



TŌREA PANGO

NELSON BRANCH BIRDS NZ. NEWSLETTER

ISSUE 20. September/October 2025

SPRING: CUCKOOS AND KAREAREA (Ed)

October, and Spring is in full flush, the godwits have returned and, in my garden, at least 3 male shining cuckoos are vying for territory and mates, with that wonderful descending song pattern and sometimes with physical combat that gives rare observations as they chase each other out of the canopy and into lower shrubs.

About 200m from the house, I have 3 pigeon lofts from the days when I used to race. There are still about 50 birds that are free flying. When I told them that the karearea had been voted bird of the year, I can tell you they were not happy! One and sometimes two pairs of falcon nest in our valley and use my pigeon loft as a takeaway restaurant. While I don't relish the idea of losing my lovely pigeons, watching falcons hunt on an almost daily basis is a real privilege. I've seen many raptors in many parts of the world and our falcon is surely the most determined and tenacious of them all. Often my pigeons are sitting on the loft roof and the falcon's first tactic is to come in low for a surprise drone strike. This is rarely effective but puts all the birds into the air. The falcon will then nonchalantly fly away, but all the time climbing way above the pigeons who have grouped into a tight flock, circling the loft. The karearea now pretends it's a peregrine, pulls its wings in tight and stoops straight into the middle of them. Again, this tactic rarely works but it has the effect of shattering the pigeons in all directions and it's at this stage that the karearea appears to select its victim and locks on. The selection is not random – the victim is always an old bird past its prime, a youngster yet to reach full strength, or an unusually coloured bird that has stood out. Once selected the falcon is relentless. I have watched pursuits of 40 minutes or more, as the pigeon climbs out of sight or twists and dives low trying to shake the falcon off.

The pigeons have developed? learned? evolved? several strategies, without which attrition from falcons would have outpaced breeding rate, whereas in fact my population of pigeons is stable. Firstly, the victim makes every attempt to unite with the rest of the birds, to regain the safety of numbers. The falcon however, aware of this, tries to force the pigeon away and into a wider circle while remaining on the inside conserving energy. Often the pigeon will climb until out of sight, but of course the falcon manages to get above and dives at it. The pigeon descends in a spiralling, unpredictable zigzag, designed to outmanoeuvre and occasionally so fast that they cannot pull out and simply die on impact with the ground. This descending flight behaviour has been selected for and amplified in several Middle eastern pigeon breeds including the Donek. A relative on Crete breeds these and I've watched many times as he whistles a bird from invisible altitude, and it drops in this breathtaking display. By now though, the hunted pigeon is desperate, but the last resort tactic often works well. Instead of continuing to attempt outflying its pursuer, the exhausted bird flies straight into a patch of gorse or open building and 'disappears' The falcon lands, often on top of the loft and I imagine it to be processing its confusion. Surprisingly the other pigeons don't give it

much attention now- it will be some time before the karearea has regained enough energy for another go and the bird in hiding will often stay put for many hours. I haven't kept records, but I do think my pigeons are smarter and more falcon-wise than they used to be and probably only about 1 in 8 hunts are successful. If I could predict the timing, I'm sure I could develop a lucrative income around charging avid foreign birders for this spectacle!

LAST MEETINGS

September

- Twenty-five people attended the September meeting. (remember the days when we were lucky to get 7?!!) Alison ran this in Kathryn's absence and set the tone with a showing of a fitness training program for birders. Link below!
<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/4LCqOYSHXT8>
- Robin Toy gave a talk entitled "Quest for the world's most unusual bird"
- Rebecca Bowater shared pictures of the recently arrived godwits
- David Melville reported on developments regarding submissions to TDC.

October

- Twenty-seven people attended the October meeting.
- Sandy Toy, not to be outdone by Robin gave a talk entitled '1-60 in 20 years'
- David Melville reported on several items including the status of the red billed gull colony
- Rebecca shared some great photos including a girl bunting.

QUEST FOR THE WORLD'S MOST UNUSUAL BIRD *Robin Toy*

It's not often that we get a talk that educates, and entertains, with a quiz woven through! Such was Robin Toy's beautifully structured delivery at the September meeting that introduced us to the world's most unusual birds. Clearly there is a level of subjectivity in compiling the candidates and selecting the ultimate winner, but Robin used a range of scientific criteria in making his selection, and in the process introduced us to concepts of taxonomy, phylogeny, speciation, morphology, behaviour and adaptation -all in the easy and



light-hearted way that good teachers have of getting people to learn without them even realising it!

Robin started by ruling out the majority of the world's 11,000 +species as being members of large families. Clearly if you are a tyrant flycatcher or a tanager with 400 + members in your family you aren't that unusual -however pretty you are! (7 coloured tanager picture left)

And this swag of tyrant flycatchers are just the ones found in Ecuador !!



Neither are birds eligible if they are extinct -like the passenger pigeon or imagined -like Donald Duck.

So, to some of the candidates. I consider myself extremely fortunate to have seen a fair few of the birds on Robin's list but as a bloke who sometimes struggles to suppress his inner twitcher, I found myself drooling over some of them. Here's a taster of some finalists.



What could be more resplendent than a resplendent quetzal? However, while avidly sought after by birders it's really just a glorified trogon! So, Robin's search homed in on the 37 monotypic families – the birds so unusual that they must have a whole family just to themselves. For example, this bird well known to all -the magpie goose

I was glad this got ruled out -it would be like a house sparrow getting 'bird of the year' -although better than a bat I suppose. However, Robin did use the house sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) to illustrate the standard taxonomic classification



Taxonomy

Quiz 5
What does
this acronym
stand for?

Kingdom
Phylum
Class
Order
Family
Genus
Species

Quiz 6
Fill in the
taxonomy for the
house sparrow

Animalia
Chordata
Aves
Passeriformes
Passeridae
Passer
domesticus



Robin continued introducing the audience to so many amazing birds – The poisonous Ifrit from PNG, the Eurasian wallcreeper, the extraordinary Kagu from New Caledonia and many more.



Naturally, many NZ birds featured amongst the contenders, where our geographical isolation over a very long period has engendered the development of

many unique families such as the Mohouidae (whiteheads), NZ wattlebirds, NZ parrots, NZ wrens, Stitchbirds and of course kiwi.

Robin's final pick? I really thought he would go for the oilbird. After all it's the only fruit eating, night flying, cave dwelling, echolocating, fuel harvested bird with more rods /unit area of retina than anything else and of course has its own family!! But no – the most unusual bird in the world is-----THE HOATZIN--

My
pick:
Hoatzin,
most
unusual
bird in the
world



Well, I suppose it does have its own order (not merely its own family) and may indeed be related to the archaeopteryx, and it has claws on its wings- at least as a chick, and it digests food in a similar way to a cow with its crop acting as a rumen. giving the birds a characteristic smell --hence the colloquial name 'stinkbird'. Plus, its definitely got a prehistoric vibe! But apart from that??

Great presentation, Robin – A thoroughly enjoyable evening for all.

WHITE WINGED BLACK TERN -WOW!

Over the past few weeks we have been treated to a white winged black tern in full breeding plumage that has been sighted by several people at the Boulder Bank and (presumably the same bird)? at the Motueka sand spit. These spectacular photos were taken by Chris Bernard .





UPDATES TO TDC BYLAWS, RESOURCE CONSENTS ETC.

Recently there have been a number of proposed activities with the potential to cause environmental impact within our region and David Melville on behalf of Birds Nelson has made submissions regarding these -thank you David. We are happy to report that his efforts have not been in vain. Last month the TDC approved the Responsible Camping Bylaw so that both Taupata Point, Golden Bay and Staples Street, Motueka are 'prohibited' camping areas. Additionally a consent for a Mapua boat ramp has been declined for various reasons including that construction and size of the ramp on the contaminated site presented an “unacceptable risk” because of the potential mobilisation of contaminants contained in marine sediments. Well done all!

AND THE GODWITS ARE HERE!

Captured by Rebecca Bowater- Over 500 Godwits seen at high tide Nelson Haven on the morning of September 22nd





ONE TO SIXTY IN TWENTY YEARS *Sandy Toy*

Most of us will know Sandy Toy through her work with 'Friends of Flora', the community group dedicated to conserving biodiversity in the Kahurangi National Park. Her talk, beautifully illustrated by the photography of Ruedi Mosimann, focused on what, at least for now, is a real success story -the growth of the whio population in Kahurangi over the past 20 years, from functional extirpation (one surviving bird!) to currently 60 plus birds.

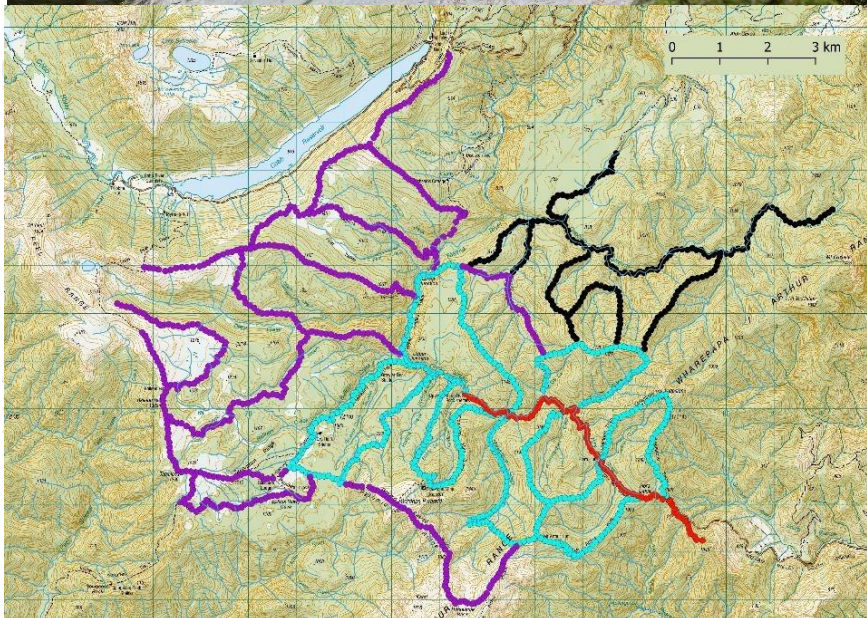


Unlike many of our endangered endemic birds, the solution of establishing populations on predator free islands is simply not an option for whio, and Sandy told us about the particular

ecological needs of this species with each breeding pair requiring a km. or more of invertebrate rich, fast flowing water- a habitat not found on offshore islands. All NZ bird success stories start with predator elimination and by 2004, riparian stoat trapping combined with DOC 1080 programs had reduced predator numbers sufficiently to warrant the release of captive reared whio obtained through 'Operation Nest Egg.' This involved catching females and fitting them with a transmitter which was then used to locate nests. The eggs were removed and the "whiolings" reared in captivity. 10 birds were released in



late March 2004 but by July six were dead. Clearly captive reared birds had not learned the skills needed to survive in 'real' habitat. A new plan to catch and relocate naturally reared young whio proved more successful. (Left) are 'Maryann and Bill' the first breeding pair named after two pioneers of the project.



By 2004 1348 stoat traps had been installed, along the river systems, with each dot on the map (left) representing a trap, and whio numbers had risen to 28 breeding pairs, with a total of 60 birds. These comprised the progeny of successful breeding and also recruitment into the population from other

areas. With many chicks now raised each year there was some mystery around where the young dispersed, but it now appears that many moved further north into the Grecian River system.

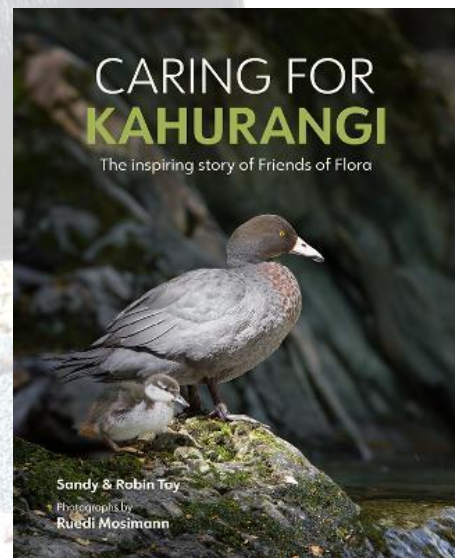
While all is well with the whio population in Kahurangi for now there are still some looming threats. Climate change is producing more flash flooding events which have the effect of



scouring out streams and reducing invertebrate populations on which whio feed. Feral cats and ferrets, previously absent are now appearing and are proving difficult to trap without also putting kiwi and

other species at risk. A new box trap is being trialled and it seems likely that facial recognition technology may provide a safer way to trap without collateral damage. Through her talk Sandy recognised the huge amount of work done by many volunteers who have dedicated countless hours, not only to whio conservation, but to the health and wellbeing of the entire Kahurangi ecosystem. Thank you Sandy for another great 'Toy Talk' and to Ruedi Mosimann for the use of his photos.

Sandy and Robin's newly released book 'Caring for Kahurangi' is not only a great read but would be a perfect Christmas present for a family member - especially if they are completely disinterested so you get to read it first! Purchasing a copy also helps support 'Friends of Flora' It is available online or presumably directly through Friends of Flora.



NEST RECORD SCHEME

A timely reminder from David to consider participating in the Birds NZ Nest Record Scheme. I quote directly from the website.

'The object of the scheme is to provide abundant and comprehensive data on length, time and peak of breeding seasons, clutch size, number of clutches, incubation and fledgling periods, nest sites and materials used in nest building. Hundreds of cards are needed before a valid analysis can be attempted for any one species and hundreds more to confirm results of the first analysis and show what variations occur between seasons or between districts.

Nest observations have been used in many books and papers.' For further information go to; <https://www.birdsnz.org.nz/schemes/nest-record-scheme/> And to download a record card—<https://www.birdsnz.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Nest-Record-Card.pdf>

RED BILLED GULLS AT PORT NELSON *David Melville*

At the October meeting David gave us a presentation centred on the history and current situation regarding local Red Billed Gull breeding colonies. The first serious attempts to record and monitor this species were made in the breeding seasons of 1943 -45 by a

Nelson nesting colonies

- 1943-44 c.67 on Boulder Bank opposite Atawhai Church
- 1944-45 c.100 on Boulder Bank opposite Atawhai Church
- 1950-51 c.200 on Boulder Bank south of the Lighthouse
- 1964-65 840 on Boulder Bank opposite Atawhai Church
- 1964-65 Resights of ringed birds showed birds moving between years (Atawhai to Lighthouse)

THE DISTRIBUTION OF BREEDING COLONIES AND STATUS OF THE RED-BILLED GULL IN NEW ZEALAND AND ITS OUTLYING ISLANDS

L. GURR, Massey University of Manawatu, Palmerston North
F. C. KINSKY, Dominion Museum, Wellington

gentleman named L. Gurr who banded chicks using Otago University bird rings. Further data shows increasing numbers but also movement of the actual placement of the colony. By 2014-16

numbers were little changed with around 905 pairs. In 2022 a drone survey was conducted and data, analysed through DuckDuckGo software, showed 2188 occupied nest sites, mainly on piles of driftwood from the recent storms.

2022 drone survey – total 2188 apparently occupied nests



The drone was unavailable for a 2024 survey, but 1460 nests were counted manually using David's patented pasta marking method. Basically when one of the team counts a nest they chuck a piece of pasta on it! Ecofriendly, biodegradable and very visible.

This year everything was organised for another full survey-The drone was hired, airport clearance given, pasta procured, BUT the team ran into a wee snag. On September 10th there



were around 1000 birds present at the Cut. On September 11th there were none. It appears that the entire colony had relocated to Port Nelson. (Above photo) David is not sure why, although some sort of disturbance to the Boulder Bank site by dogs, humans etc is a prime suspect. Whether breeding is going to succeed in this new location remains to be seen. As David says -watch this space.

BIRDBASE *Michelle Bradshaw*

Michelle sent this link to Birdbase -a wealth of information here on all 11589 (currently) of the world's bird species. I would suggest that if you want to do well in those quizzes start reading! Thank you Michelle.

https://springernature.figshare.com/articles/dataset/BIRDBASE_A_Global_Database_of_Avian_Biogeography_Conservation_Ecology_and_Life_History_Traits/27051040?file=55634729&utm_source=Live+Audience&utm_campaign=e8dee72b13-nature-briefing-daily-20251009&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-33f35e09ea-49948892

BIRDBASE is a global avian trait database with data on 78 traits of all bird species (11,589), genera (2398), families (254), and orders (44) based on the most recent avian taxonomies published in October 2024 (eBird/Clements v2024), January 2025 (HBW/BirdLife 9.1), March 2025 (IOC v15.1), and including all the species in the first unified checklist of the birds of the world published in June 2025 (AviList). We compiled species-level ecological data from a variety of published datasets, ornithological publications and the first author's field observations of over 9300 bird species. Data were primarily compiled from 367 ornithological sources, including regional books, field guides, focused datasets, and primary literature. Most of these data were collated from the Handbook of the Birds of the World/Handbook of the

Birds of the World Alive, now Birds of the World, augmented with other sources including BirdLife International, the ornithological literature and our unpublished field observations.

NORDMANN'S GREENSHANK

I've had two goes at trying to see this species, once in Thailand and once on the Cairns waterfront which has hosted a single bird for several years -both to no avail. Anyway, David reports that 1% of the world's population (just 17 birds) were recently banded in China.

WOOD DUCK

It appears that all the chicks from the two broods known to have hatched this year have sadly now gone. Causes are obviously predation, but also the possibility that chicks are unable to exit the artificial ponds around which they breed. A simple ramp would solve this problem and hopefully the species can continue to be a feature of our area.

SOCIETY AWARDS BIRDS NZ

We have an opportunity to nominate BirdsNZ members for these awards. If you have someone that comes to mind. Please let Kathryn know. People who have received awards in the past are on the BirdsNZ website follow this link [Society Awards - Birds New Zealand](https://birdsNZ.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Awards-Guidelines.pdf)

Nominations for the following three Society awards are due by **31 December**:

- Meritorious Service
- Falla Memorial
- A.T. Edgar Junior

For award guidelines refer to birdsNZ.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Awards-Guidelines.pdf.

BITTERNS IN BRIEF

6 male bitterns were reported from the Mangarakau wetlands area with 4 birds sighted during the recent survey.

DECEMBER MEETING

Many thanks once again to the Melvilles for offering to host the December social meeting at their lovely property in Dovedale. Further details to follow.



AND JUST BECAUSE---

It's one of my favourite birds. Almost extirpated in the UK from whence it was introduced. Still heaps near Girona where my son lives and seen for several winters feeding outside my window at home. Cirl bunting, captured here by Rebecca Bowater at the Brook Sanctuary.

Yes, I know I've failed to produce another "Members's Profile" Hopefully I will get that going again in the New Year. Meanwhile articles, photos, ideas etc. for the next edition to Paul Bennett thebraveryofbeingoutofrange@gmail.com

