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*Birds New Zealand*

## *Otago Region Newsletter 6/2017 June 2017*

### **NZ Bird Conference Te Anau**

The 2017 NZ Bird Conference was quite an event in Te Anau for Queens Birthday Weekend. Neil Robertson successfully organised a full weekend for about 140 registrants. One early party (Bruce and Lala) left town on Thursday after picking up a seriously jet lagged Helen Taylor and David Lawrie from a fog delayed flight from Auckland. Helen won the prize for the most seriously long flight to get to Te Anau (Johannesburg, Perth, Auckland, Dunedin, Te Anau). After an easy trip we settled into our accommodation. The buzz for the North Islanders was the crested grebe and numbers of scaup on the lake and the greenfinch's and dunnocks on the lawn in front of the hotel. Friday was a Council meeting which was a whole day affair including constructive sessions with the RR's. Council welcomed the Society's new Secretary, Denise Fastier from Napier. We also confirmed our ongoing commitment to supporting students to participate in the Society through support to attend conferences and the NZ Bird Research fund. RR's confirmed the priority of Youth Camps and encouraged the Council to get on with developing a new national monitoring scheme or Atlas. During the day registrants for the conference trickled in and so there was an increasing sense of the Weekend coming together. Saturday started well with a warm welcome from Neil. The Science presentations flowed for the next two full days. They were all of high quality and covered a wide range of research projects. Many were report backs for grants from either the Projects Assistance fund or the NZ Bird Research fund. Helen gave a very report back on the membership survey that she earlier in the year. Helen posed a number of big questions about how we wish to be seen as a Society and be leaders in New Zealand.

Natalie Fosdick's report on the genetics of the black robin was one of a number of student presentations. Natalie was the successful winner of the inaugural Best Student Prize at the Conference.

At the end of business on Saturday the Society's AGM was held. It was well supported with 80 members present for the meeting. David Lawrie was in the chair and shepherded us through the agenda, Denise kept the minutes for the meeting. Then it was time for more food.

Sunday started with workshops and carried on with quality science and good time for catching up with friends and colleagues. The conference dinner was held at the hotel and the Chefs' put on a full spread for us all. Monday was clear and the various field trips headed off. I was helping with a walk into the Iris Burn. For the fast people there was a chance to hunt for a blue duck and for the slow party the forest birds kept us amused. As the day warmed up the birds became more vocal and small flocks of brown creepers were seen in the shrubs. It was very relaxing eating our sandwiches on the shore of Lake Manapouri without accompanying sandflies. We all made good time back the and fast party was very happy having seen a blue duck. Then back into the van for the drive home.



The conference was seamless and well organised the venue very relaxing and access to birds easy for those who skived out of sessions. Although there were cool mornings the weather was settled and came clear in the afternoons. With 140 people registered the conference was a success and showed

that with a bit of commitment we can hold highly professional gatherings pretty much anywhere.

**Bruce McKinlay**

## **Field Trip to Lake Orbell and Takahe Valley in Murchison Mountains.**

The highlight of the weekend for me was the trip to Lake Orbell, a place I had never thought I would see. I had signed up for the trip within hours of registrations going online in January so it had been a long wait and the whole expedition was weather-dependent. But miraculously, Monday dawned fine and calm. 13 of us were permitted to go along with 3 DOC rangers. The helicopters whisked up and away cross the lake, up over a ridge and down to Takahe Valley floor to just about the same spot from which Orbell had seen the ‘extinct’ takahe in 1948 on the edge of the lake. The area still is magical.



The temperature was near freezing with hoar frost covering the tussocks and bush and the lake partly frozen, but clear blue sky, a sprinkling of snow on the highest peaks and reflections of bush and mountains in the lake. A pair of Paradise duck, a couple of Scaup and a NZ Falcon were spotted. Straight away we saw sign of takahe, droppings and piles of pulled out, discarded tussock shoots. There are only two or maybe 3 pair of Takahe in this valley. DOC staff had hoped to catch Glenda, the local takahe to replace her transmitter - they located her with aerial tracking, but she eluded capture by heading up into the forested hillside (they spend a lot of time in the winter within the bush and eat the roots of hypolepis fern). We had morning tea at the historic but still functional DOC hut while we watched and waited.



Then we all trekked up the valley beside Lake Orbell on the rock-hard frozen sand, along side footprints of takahe frozen in the sand. About a 1km up the valley, DOC ranger, Jason, played the call and we heard an answering call further up the valley. Further along the reply came from really close, just on the edge of the bush. The agile DOC rangers managed to chase it down and catch it. They used the opportunity to do a health check, weigh, and replace a broken band. And all of us had the thrill of seeing a 'wild' takahe in the hand. It was Hunua, who had travelled over from the next valley about 12 km away from where she had been released in 2015.

A very happy **Mary Thompson**

## Exploring Pomona Island



A group of around fifteen people attending the Birds NZ 2017 conference in Te Anau had the good fortune to take a day trip to Pomona Island on Lake Manapouri. Pomona is New Zealand's largest inland island, at 260 ha, and is a nature reserve. Deer, possums, stoats, rats, and mice were eradicated in 2006 - 2007.

We arrived at Manapouri at 8.30am ready for the short boat ride across the lake in the icy air. Excitement built as we watched the sun rise over the mountains, and begin to light up the lake. As we made the crossing, we saw black-backed gulls, paradise ducks, and a little pied shag.



On arrival on Pomona, we found kiwi tracks imprinted in the sandy shore – a small population of Haast tokoeka adults have been established on the island. Our first bird sightings were of grey warblers, riroriro and fantails, piwakawaka, and soon after, yellow-crowned kākāriki were

sighted swooping above us. From here, we split up into smaller groups one group including Graeme Loh, Craig McKenzie, and Ian Southey went to tackle the island summit of 300 m. A second group went around the island edge, while the rest of us went on a more inland route covering higher ground.



Pomona has an amazing forest understorey developing; clearly the removal of deer has resulted in a massive vegetation recovery. Lush moss, ferns, and a variety of brightly coloured fungi covered the springy ground among the beech. The tracks follow the extensive trapping lines. The trapping team must buy out Te Anau's stock of eggs when they reset the traps! This extensive trapping network is essential in preventing reinvasion by pests from the mainland, as Pomona is only 500 m from the shore across the section of lake known as 'Hurricane Passage'. With a name like that, I wouldn't fancy making the crossing on a windy day!

Fantails followed us into the bush, and in particular, one black fantail joined us for some time. It wasn't long before a South Island robin showed up to investigate our party. The robins on Pomona certainly looked well-fed! We saw several that were happy to pose for photos, and a particularly inquisitive one led me along the path for a time. We occasionally heard the bellbirds/korimako singing distinctively in their regional accent.

The second group had good views of tomtits, bellbirds, and a kākārīki, before having a robin observation disturbed by a kārearea swooping in and perching right above the group for several minutes. As we got further into the forest, the soundscape lit up with bird calls, which quickly led to sightings of the most highly anticipated bird of the day; the yellowhead/mōhua.



We had great views of a good number of mōhua flitting among the canopy – those of us with bins were very pleased, and a few good photos were taken. While robins were reintroduced to the island in 2009, mōhua were only reintroduced in 2011, and the population appears to be flourishing. We also

saw brown creeper/pīpipi here, another first for some of our group. We stayed to observe this particularly active patch for forest for around ten minutes before continuing on to a morning tea spot on the shoreline.



Here we were joined by a tomtit/miromiro, who stayed with us for almost the whole of our break, allowing the photographers among us to get some stellar photos. As we cooled down during our break, we soon decided to move on and warm up. This time we followed the

track back along the island perimeter, where we shortly met up with the group that had gone that way. Along the way we were lucky enough to see a kārearea swooping through the forest. This explained why we only heard but didn't see any mōhua on the return. We did however see plenty of busy riflemen/tītīpounamu in the canopy, and spent some time testing our hearing by listening to their calls.

The return journey covered much flatter ground, and it wasn't long before we arrived back at the original shoreline. We enjoyed what was left of our lunch bag here, and tried to avoid the sandflies, while we waited for the summit trio to join us. They were very pleased to have reached the top, and had also had excellent views of kārearea and mōhua. All too soon, lunch was over and the boat arrived to take us back across the lake. Just as we were getting ready to board, a flock of 7-8 kererū flapped overhead. I'd never seen such a large flock before. Fantastic end to a fantastic trip. Many thanks to John Whitehead and David Fortune who were our knowledgeable guides (John being the head of the trust for the island, and having made over 200 trips to the island over the last ten years). You can find out more about Pomona Island at [www.pomona-island.org.nz](http://www.pomona-island.org.nz).

All photos by **Edin Whitehead**.

**Natalie Forsdick**

## **Otago Otago Shag Count**

Following the description of Otago shags as a species separate from that in Foveaux Strait and the information that it had gone through a severe bottle neck of near extinction by Nic Rawlence we were surprised to see that the status of the shag in the Conservation status of NZ birds 2016 (released late April 2017) was listed as "Recovering".

Then visiting Northland ornithologist Les Feasey reported counting 1450 Otago shags on Sumpter Wharf on a late May evening. We were incredulous, but he had detailed photos and Richard Schofield of Balclutha reviewed the count and it was true.

Maybe we did not really know what was happening with the Otago shags? We saw the opportunity to do a co-ordinated evening count to improve our knowledge. Saturday evening 17 June we set out.

Bruce McKinlay staked out Green Island	saw	286
Francesca Cunninghame and Jorge at Wharekakahu	saw	89
Derek Onley at Taiaroa	saw	322
Graeme Loh and Sue Maturin at Maukiekie	saw	760
Philippa Agnew at Sumpter Wharf	photographed	1862

a total of between three and four thousand Otago shags



A team was needed to count and recount Philippa's photos patiently. The wharf is quite a bird perch!

This leaves out the Nuggets and Kina Kina Island and some small roosting sites such as Huirapa, Heyward Point and White Island.

So this raises questions about why the weight of numbers is in North Otago. And demonstrates the importance of Sumpter Wharf as a shag refuge and spectacle.

**Graeme Loh**

Waitaki District Council is investigating reopening wharf to the public. ed.

## Not Another Otago Pelagic: Taiaroa Canyon 28th May

Well it was another great trip out and it was great to have people with good cameras and greater diligence, testing me with proposals for birds that just might be and providing evidence. Thanks especially to Mike Ashbee & Matthias Dehling who came down from Christchurch, and Les Feasey



There are several birds that are being sorted with the help of Derek Onley. Les reported Westland petrels from an earlier fishing vessel trip to the canyon. I was doubtful but now we have the evidence and some were seen on our trip. Whether they can be separated from black petrels is difficult.



We suspected short-tailed shearwaters, and indeed some photos are confirming that. Probably still a few sooty shearwaters around too.

The small black and white shearwater seen under Taiaroa Head has not been examined yet. Derek supports my identification of fluttering shearwaters two weeks earlier on the birding big day, but there are Hutton's and little shearwater options to ponder on.



All in all the Vivienne J voyages put on by the Monarch are providing new and good data. The skipper Nigel earned his keep pointing out the large albatross that was different: a Gibson's that we had been ignoring.

There is still that frustration of not really knowing. Matthias is determined to find prions other than fairy and broad-billed among the birds we see. Perhaps we need two cameras linked up to provide stereo photos to take measurements from? Or a range record in the photo metadata? Getting permission to catch?

Also those people coming down from Canterbury! I say to them get out to sea there and try getting out to the start of the Hikurangi canyon that leads eventually to the Kermadecs.

**Graeme Loh**

## Ornithological snippets

In addition to the pelagic reported elsewhere in this newsletter, Les Feasey ventured out of Moeraki on 8th June, and one of the more interesting findings was a pair of **Black-browed Mollymawks**. There has been a series of **Sooty Shearwater** sightings on land, with one being washed ashore at Wangaloa on 10th May, with others turning up at Romahapa (6th May) and Clydevale (27th May), the latter being found in a woodpile.



In Oamaru on 31st May, the **Stewart Island (Otago) Shag** population reached 1426, alongside 561 Spotted Shags, counted from photographs by Les Feasey. Also in Oamaru, an **Australasian Gannet** was seen flying around the inner harbour by Bev Alexander on 1st June.



On 17th June Craig McKenzie saw (and photographed) a **Bittern** in the Upper Manuherikia above Falls Dam.

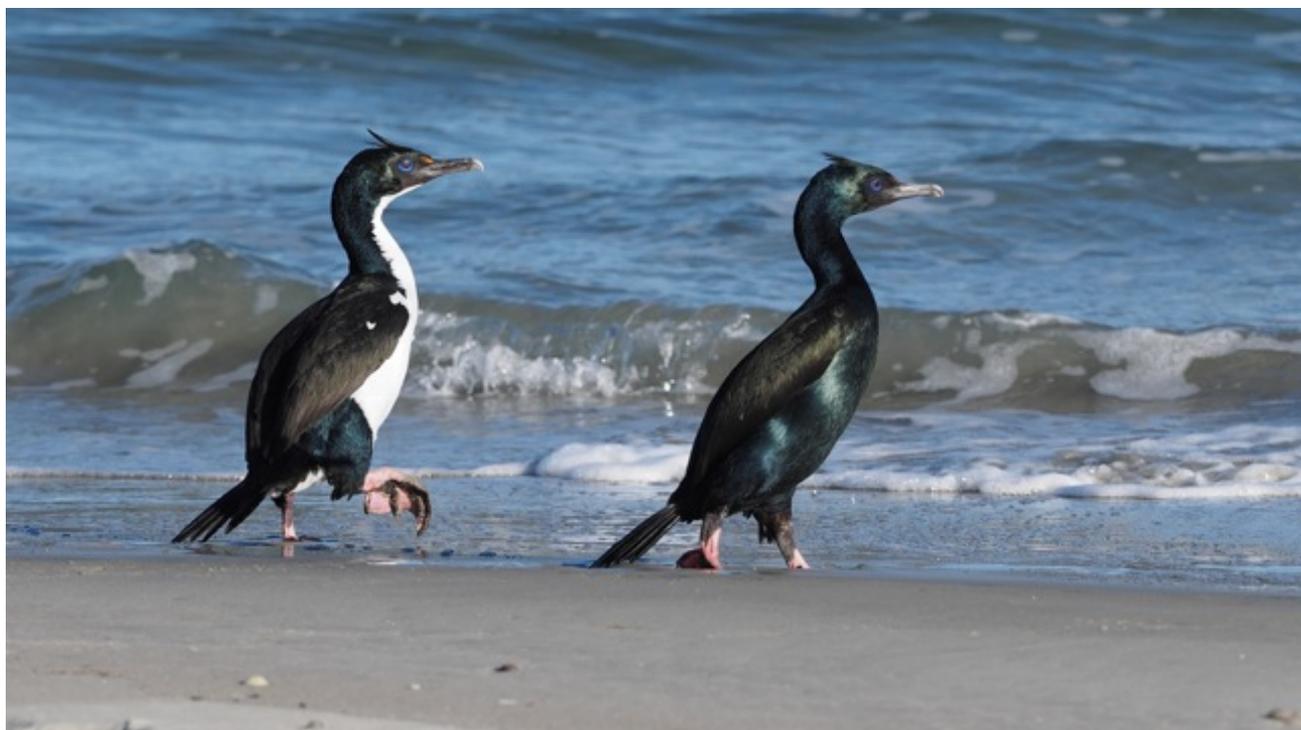
**Cattle Egrets** have been scarce in New Zealand this year, but the Inchclutha birds numbered 6 on 17th June, after the first bird was seen on 30th April.

**South Island Pied Oystercatchers** were returning to their breeding sites from mid-June, with Suzanne Schofield coming across 1 by the river in Balclutha on 12th, and 10 there on 16th. There was a pair on Inchclutha the following day. Suzanne also reported 4 **White-fronted Terns** in Balclutha on 28th May, and 2 **Black-fronted Terns** there on 30th, and again on 19th June.

While walking the Routeburn Track on 31<sup>st</sup> May, David Thomas estimated at least 105 **Rifleman** in just over 2 hours. Finally, a **Tui** on Inchclutha on 24th May was followed by at least 5 in the same location on 17th June – there are no previous eBird records for the island.

Correction: The reported in the previous newsletter of a **Bittern** beside the Glenorchy/Paradise Road on 15th March was actually in 2016. Apologies for the error.

**Richard Schofield**



## Notices and Business

### **Regional Representative's Report from AGM and Regional Rep Meeting,**

Each year the Regional Representatives from all the Regions of Birds NZ meet together prior to the annual conference, when we have a chance to discuss what we have been doing and plan some new things along with Council members. I will list some points that are of general interest.

- Youth engagement was a recurring theme. Birds NZ has sponsored three Youth Camps so far, the latest being at Waitangi. The 2018 Camp is to be at Stewart Island for 4-5 days during the school holidays-dates to be decided. If any members know of young people, 12- 16 years, who would be keen to attend, let me know so I can send you the information as soon as it comes. It is a very popular event and numbers are limited. Many key Birds NZ members recalled similar camps in the past that engendered their lifelong interest in birds.
- Birds NZ is also introducing some new features that should be attractive to tertiary students: reduced registration fees for conference, prizes for talks and posters, prize for best publication in Notornis and we will continue our travel awards 'til funds run out.
- Banding Birds: all Regions expressed an interest in projects that involved banding birds. However, these require Level 3 banders to oversee the banding and this is a limiting factor; if you have Banding certification please let me know.
- Funding. At the moment Birds NZ has a goodly amount of funding ear-marked for bird projects and worthwhile project will be favourably considered. Any ideas?
- National Project is still being explored by a sub-committee of Council; ongoing collection of data in eBird using 10k grid for determining trends and distribution changes, with methods to complement Doc and Landcare monitoring.
- Logo Change. The most controversial topic was that Council is exploring re-branding with a new logo, web-site revamp and a te reo

name; these changes will be presented at the 2018 AGM, which is to be at Waitangi. The location will again be a draw-card for us, but for different reasons than Te Anau was.

- Australasian Ornithological Society Conference, 2021; could it be held in Dunedin? **Mary Thompson Regional Representative.**

### **Another Monarch Wildlife Cruises Otago Canyons Trip**

On the 9th July, we plan to once more take the Vivienne J out past Cape Saunders to the deeper waters and offshore canyons to look for seabirds and other wildlife that frequent these rich feeding grounds. The trips are for photographers, birdwatchers and nature lovers. Each trip has seen 20 or more species of sea-birds, with some very interesting sightings and behaviour. We will again have Graeme Loh as our on-board go-to guy for species ID.

Date: Sunday 9th July 2017

Departs: Careys Bay pontoon 8:00am. Please be at Careys Bay at 7.45am.

Returns: Careys Bay pontoon 3:00pm

Cost: \$160 per person (limited to 12 people)

To book and reserve your place call 0800 666 272.

You will need to bring your lunch and water bottles - hot drinks will be available. You will need warm clothing, sunglasses, sunblock and a hat - along with your camera gear, binocs and field guides. We also advise sea-sick remedies

More info can be found on our website here:

<http://www.wildlife.co.nz/Wildlife-Tours/Otago-Canyons-Pelagic-Trip>

## **eBird news**

There have been a few comments recently about erroneous data on eBird, with reports of unlikely species, or species in unexpected locations or numbers. This is inevitably going to happen occasionally, especially with species that are relatively common and therefore do not trigger an alert. The filters for each species are set on an Otago-wide scale, and try to strike a balance between picking up larger than expected numbers, while not flooding the reviewer's inbox! So a species that is fairly numerous in some places is not going to be picked up by the filter when it occurs elsewhere (e.g. a seabird reported inland).

Questionable reports can also appear when submitters use the system to store a list for a trip, and put all species on one list, the location of which may not be relevant for most birds on the list; for example, someone listing all birds seen on a trip from Invercargill to Dunedin may have the location shown in a remote area of the Catlins!

If you see a dubious record in eBird, please let me know and I will act on it.

**Richard Schofield**

## **Taonga of an Island Nation: Report.**

The parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment released a huge report at the end of last month, entitled 'Taonga of an island nation: saving New Zealand's Birds'. You can download or request a copy from <http://www.pce.parliament.nz/publications/taonga-of-an-island-nation-saving-new-zealands-birds>. This report looks at the desperate state of New Zealand's native birds, the challenges they face, and what it might take to restore them in large numbers back on to the mainland. Much of the data establishing the status of birds that was used by the Commissioner in her report have been derived from two bird-distribution atlases prepared by Birds NZ, which have documented changes over a 20 year period. "This is a wonderful endorsement of the substantial effort put in by our volunteer members over many years", said President David Lawrie. Long-term data collection will be continued via eBird entries.

## Programme 2017

Monthly Indoor Meetings will be held at 7.30pm in the Benham Seminar Room, Benham Building, Department of Zoology, 340 Great King Street.

**Wed June 28** Indoor Meeting. Bruce McKinlay. How to discover new things about our birds using eBird data.

**June 24 - July 2** Garden Bird Survey. Count maximum number of birds seen in backyard during a 1 hour period.

**Sun July 2nd** Winter Wader Count. High tide Dunedin 10.54 hrs. Height 1.9m. Counters needed at Aramoana, Hoopers & Papanui Inlets. New counters welcome. Contact: peter.schweigman@xtra.co.nz

**Sun July 9th** Otago Canyons voyage on Monarch Vivienne J 8:00am Careys Bay , return 3pm. \$160 per person. Book 0800 666 272.

**Sat July 15** Sinclair Wetlands Winter Survey. Carpool leaving Dunedin at 9.00 am. Backup Sunday July 16. To join the survey teams and for information contact Mary Thompson 464 0787, maryt@actrix.co.nz

**Wed July 26** Indoor Meeting. Helen Taylor. "Avoiding conservation by numbers: how genetics can help save threatened bird species"

**Wed August 23** Indoor Meeting. Claudia Mischler on "From the High Arctic to the sub-Antarctic and a little in-between: life as a biologist amongst the seabirds in some of the remotest parts of the world"..

**Wed Sept 27** Indoor Meeting. Fergus Sutherland on 'Te Rere, thirty-six years helping penguins and other birds on the remote Catlins Coast.'

- Sat October 7** Sinclair Wetland Spring Survey. Carpool leaving Dunedin at 8.30 am. Backup Sunday October 8th. To join the survey teams and for information contact Mary Thompson 464 0787, [maryt@actrix.co.nz](mailto:maryt@actrix.co.nz)
- Wed October 25** Indoor Meeting. Francesca Cunninghame on 'The future for Darwin's rarest finch - lessons learnt from 10 years conservation management of the Critically Endangered mangrove finch.'
- Wed Nov 22** Indoor Meeting. Mel Young on 'Foraging Ecology of Yellow-eyed Penguins'.
- Sun Nov 26** Summer Wader Count. High tide Dunedin at 10.10am, 1.8m. Counters needed at Aramoana, Hoopers, Papanui. New counters very welcome to join the teams.  
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Many thanks to all who contributed.

Contributions for next newsletter please by 19th July.

Can contributors please send any photographs separately from text as it makes compiling and formatting the newsletter much simpler and retains picture quality better. Thanks.