MIRANDA NEWS

Naturalists' Trust

February 2012 Issue 84

Bittern at Miranda

New Hide!

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Upcoming Events - note the times!

March 11* Sunday
Autumn Migration Day: –See Arctic birds at their best.
8 a.m. High tide 10:00 so birdwatching FIRST, It's a big tide so be early then TALK at 11 a.m

Guest Speaker: Gerry Kessels – 'Windfarms & Waders'
Windfarms can be a serious hazard to birds and Gerry has been studying the possible threats to migrating waders in NZ.

May 13 Sunday
Annual General Meeting:
10 a.m. AGM followed by talk, then birdwatching. High tide 1:15 pm

Guest Speaker: Brett Gartrell – 'The Rena Wildlife Response'
As Director of the Wildlife Response Unit, Brett Gartrell from Massey School of Veterinary Sciences, fronted the news during the Rena saga and has also been involved with Miranda Field courses and the implanting of transmitters in godwits.

June 10 , then again November 4.
OSNZ - Firth of Thames, Wader Census:
Ph Tony Habraken 09-238-5284 for details

August 25 Saturday
Winter Pot Luck Dinner: 6.00 p.m.
Working Bee 9 a.m – 1 p.m. Birdwatching 1 p.m – 4 p.m
Then dinner. Come for ONE or ALL events
Guest Speaker Brian Gill – Museum Mystery Musings

Brian is curator of vertebrates at Auckland Museum and has many interesting topics to talk about, which one will it be?

October 21 Sunday
Welcome To The Birds Day: - high Tide 12:40
10.00 a.m. Guest Speaker – : John Dowding – 'NZ Dotterels' what else! John is the leading authority on this species so will have all the latest news about these threatened birds, including any long-term effects of the Rena saga.

January 9-15 2013 Residential Field Course!

Contact the Centre for details of these events. 09 232 2781 shorebird@farmside.co.nz

Front Cover: Bittern stalking the Swallow Pools just south of the Shorebird Centre. Photo Ian Southey

Back Cover: The new Hide. Photo Keith Woodley

From the Blackboard 15 February 2012

Arctic Migrants

Bar-tailed Godwit	4900
Red Knot	3800
Turnstone	16
Golden Plover	14
Sharp-tailed Sandpiper	7
Marsh Sandpiper	1
Red-necked Stint	1
Curlew Sandpiper	1

New Zealand Species

Pied Oystercatcher	
Wrybill	1500
NZ Dotterel	
Banded Dotterel	
Variable Oystercatcher	
Black-billed Gull	
Red-billed Gull	
White-fronted Tern	
Caspian Tern	
Pied Stilt	
Royal Spoonbill	3
Banded Rail	

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The Newsletter of the Miranda Naturalists' Trust is published four times a year to keep members in touch, and to bring news of events at the Miranda Shorebird Centre and along the East Asian-Australasian Flyway.

Shore Skink

Ian Southey

Canon netting involves an awful lot of waiting for something to happen. On January 16th there was a small flurry of excitement, from me at least, when Olga Brochner called out that a lizard had run under her bag and a smallish brown skink was captured. It was clearly a shore skink (*Oligosoma smithii*) with a characteristically sharpish snout, a shortish tail and was an adult by size. Every now and again skinks have been reported on the shellbank at Miranda but this seems to be the first in some time to be identified.

photo Dick Veitch

Later, during the field course, another two were seen further to the north up towards Taramaire so it is possible that there are a quite a few scattered along the coast, even if people don't typically look for them.

Shore Skinks are about as limited in habitat as their name suggests and are usually found just above the high tide line. Their range is restricted to the northern North Island, between about Gisborne and Muriwai Beach. They are small to medium in size, a big one with an unbroken tail can measure just over 15 cm long, but most will be closer to 10cm. Colour patterns vary substantially. They are commonly found on rocky shores but are typically very dark there, often black or nearly so. On sandy beaches they tend to be a much lighter brown – like the Miranda skinks seen so far.

Compared to the other species of skinks that might also be found in this area, shore skinks are much more likely to be seen. They feed during the day and will bask in the sun in cool weather. For shelter they will hide under logs, stones, seaweed or other debris and also among low dense vegetation. If there is low rough cover, perhaps like the rank weedy grassland between the shellbank and the road, they may extend a little further inland. They feed on a wide range of invertebrates and on rocky shores may even forage between the tide lines. They are also partial to the small fruits of coastal shrubs when they can get them and may scavenge carrion. They usually breed in February or March, females give birth to live young, up to six in number but usually about two.

Some mainland populations seem to have disappeared in recent years but the species is not regarded as threatened. It has been shown that they are eaten by mice but are likely to be taken by a variety of predators up to the size of cats and harriers. Populations monitored at Tawharanui have shown that they are more common when mice are controlled over the long term. Similarly experiments on offshore islands have shown that while Shore Skinks can persist in the presence of rats and other predators they become much more common without. All those rank seeding weeds behind the shell bank must favour rodents but it is good to know that these lizards are able to struggle on.

Movements of bar-tailed godwits and red knots within New Zealand

By P.F. Battley, R. Schuckard and D.S. Melville
Science for Conservation 315. 56 p.

This publication is now in press and can be downloaded from:
http://www.doc.govt.nz/upload/documents/science-and-technical/sfc315.pdf

The Department of Conservation regularly makes available new publications for download from their website free of charge. You can sign up for an email update when a new publication is released at
http://www.doc.govt.nz/publications/science-and-technical/new-publications/

all photos Ian Southey

Bitterns in New Zealand

Ian Southey

Over the years I've seen a number of bitterns near Miranda but not so many that I can't remember just about every one. Usually they were flushed out of a drain - for a while there were two at Waitakaruru that were seen fairly frequently like this. Sometimes they just fly over but a particularly memorable one stopped briefly on Widgery Lake. They have been seen around the Stilt Ponds, flushed from the mangroves on the way down to the hide or flying inland presumably to some choice drain or other. Just not very often.

For those who do not know them, Australasian Bitterns are a large, bulky heron; although a White Heron can stretch out a bit longer, Bitterns are much heavier with most males topping a kilogram, some approaching two. Intricately patterned buffy and darker brown, they are well matched to the sombre brown tones of the swamps and are very difficult to see in spite of their size. They have a stout but sharply pointed bill and long greenish legs with particularly long slender toes to carry their weight over soft ground and floating vegetation.

The tight cover in the swamps really is their element; they seem slide into the densest cover and disappear with barely a ripple or a rustle. They do not typically seem to make or use paths but have been seen to walk through reeds by grasping several stems together with their very long toes. They are so hard to see that it has been suggested that they are mainly nocturnal. The people who have known them best, however, saw them in the daytime, most often in the early morning and evening but in winter, at least, peak activity was at midday.

Caught in the open they famously freeze stretched to their full height with their bills pointing up, trying, and often succeeding, to look like a dead stick before deciding whether to fly, sink into the vegetation and slink away, or just carry on with whatever they were doing. In this posture they are even said to sway, when appropriate, as if moved by the wind. They use this posture fairly frequently and it has been described more broadly as a surveillance posture. When moving through the swamp they periodically climb up just high enough to see over the cover in this posture.

Hunting bitterns are a model of stealth and patience. Often they are observed hunting along the edge of, or in, water up to knee deep. They walk carefully lifting each leg high and placing it slowly down. In the presence of prey they come to the alert stretching their necks well forward waiting a chance to strike. Their eyes are angled downwards and can also swivel so they can see their prey well even if their gaze seems to be directed outward. They can wait like this for up to ten minutes then if their chance doesn't come they move on looking for the next. The technique seems to be as successful as it is frustrating to watch. Geoff Moon also reported watching them waiting motionless with their bill partly immersed in the water to catch tadpoles and aquatic insects.

A wide range of food is eaten, from insects and spiders, fish and frogs, to mice, rats and small birds; as long as it is alive when caught. They seem to prefer and target large prey by covering long distances when they forage. They are quite capable of handling very big game, notably eels up to 60cm long, and some titanic struggles have been recorded. Eels typically contort vigorously to try escape the Bittern's grasp so they often march back from the edge of the water when they grab a large one. They shake and batter it and will use their feet if necessary to keep control until the eel has been subdued enough to swallow head first.

Bitterns are well equipped for such slimy food. Like other herons they have patches of powder down, short friable feathers that crumble into a fine talc-like powder suitable for absorbing slime and they use it for this purpose. The middle toe nail is flattened with many fine vertical grooves said to help with combing the powdered slime out of the feathers.

Social behaviour

The private life of the Bittern has largely remained private, but various glimpses over the years have allowed much of it to be pieced together.

When they can't be seen they can sometimes be heard. Males give a deeply resonant booming call that doesn't sound so loud close up but carries remarkably well, several kilometres in fact. At Haast booming Bitterns in the swamps near sea level were easily heard from the tops. This sound is made by males which have a large air sac on their necks which they can inflate, then release the air to make the booming sound. It seems to be given in bursts of three or four, a deep vibrating "uh-oomph", the first part short and quiet the second long and loud. Booming can be heard throughout the year but it is far more common in the spring between August and November. Apparently it is made so the females can be kept aware of the presence of males but

there may be a territorial role as well. Bitterns are sparsely spread with one study in the Whangamarino Swamp in 1981 showing average densities of one per 49 ha and a peak of 8.3 birds per 100 ha The males are certainly territorial and the females may be too, as is found in the Eurasian Bittern. In that species a male's territory is large and encompasses the territories of several females with whom he expects to mate. These territories are vigorously defended by stabbing with their sharp bills on the ground and in flight. Dead Eurasian Bitterns have been found with numerous stab marks showing the value these birds place on holding good territory. Sometimes nests are found in close proximity, in New Zealand two were once found just 20 m apart and a much larger group has been recorded from Australia so females appear to be less aggressive, perhaps sometimes nesting in colonies.

Nesting is better known thanks to several generations of bird photographers mostly working in times when these birds were more plentiful, but there is more to learn here too. Indications of breeding have been observed over a considerable part of the year but most eggs have been found between late August or September until December. This period mostly coincides with the peak booming season so it may reflect the peak time for mating and laying.

Male Eurasian Bitterns do not assist with nesting or chick rearing and there are no indications that Australasian Bitterns are any different. Usually an area of densely covered wetland is chosen for a nest, although one was found under bracken adjacent to a pine forest 800m away from water. Otherwise nests were recorded most often recorded in raupo, rushes or sedges with two were found in dense willow. The nests are often surrounded by fairly deep water, often more than 50cm in depth. They are broad, substantial platforms 50 cm or more across, which leaves plenty of room for the female to manoeuvre her big feet around the contents. The nest is typically built from the leaves or twigs of the plants nearby and usually less than half a metre from the surface of the water.

The eggs are a lovely brownish green in colour, usually about four of them are laid but records range from two to six. Incubation of the eggs has been recorded as taking 23-26 days. They are laid at intervals of one to two days but the female Bittern starts incubating immediately so that hatching dates are quite spread and the chicks vary in size. Not all eggs hatch and not all chicks survive. This is an evolved strategy in many different kinds of birds to cope with an uncertain food supply known as "brood reduction". If the season turns out to be a poor one the smallest chicks starve and die in sequence until the female is left with the number she can properly care for. In a good year she can rear the lot as the bird at Miranda appears to have done.

The female bittern really do care for their eggs and young, they have an intimidating threat display, where they spread their drooped wings, expand the loose feathers around the throat and around the head and they lunge with their sharp, solid bills. It is not all threat either, an observer at Muriwai flushed a Bittern from beside its nest and found a Harrier wounded, in the water and unable to fly. Buller provides and old record of Mr. A.G. Nichols who was attacked by Bitterns when he inadvertently approached their nest while eel fishing on the Kaipara. "The birds made determined thrusts at him with their bills, ruffling up their feathers and quivering their wings in the highest state of excitement; and so persistent were they that at length he seized one of them by the head and despatched it."

The chicks do not seem to be the most beautiful of baby birds but they apparently have their charms. They are sparsely covered with long fawn-grey down, including a prominent tuft on the tops of their heads and have been compared to golliwogs. They are fed by regurgitation, at first the female will deposit food on the nest to be picked up by the chicks but as the chicks grow they become more insistent and take it directly from her bill. Mike Soper, an admirer of the Bittern's grace, recorded the regurgitation as "silent, done in slow motion and completely effortless" - "a much more refined process when compared with ... shags". It seems to take seven or eight weeks before the chicks fledge. At first they stay on the nest platform where they are periodically brooded and fed but begin to wander away into the surrounding cover after about three weeks, about the time their feathers start to develop. After they leave the nest they seem to use several feeding platforms of flattened reeds nearby.

Stable water levels appear to be preferred for nesting sites but by summer water levels in swamps are often falling. This is a period when Bitterns may be seen in unexpected places. I have thought these birds would be dispersing young but it may be adults forced to move as water levels change. They do seem to have a semi-

nomadic and opportunistic nature, as the response of the bird at Miranda to the unusually consistently filled pond this summer has shown us.

Observations in Whangamarino swamp after the breeding season in 1986 showed Bitterns strongly favoured the Kopuku Arm with estimated densities of up to 30 birds per ha. for a short period of time. Although these birds still fed alone it appeared that they were flying in from other parts of the swamp in the mornings to feed at this spot. In this area the opening weekend of the duck hunting season appeared to depress the numbers drastically and then they left altogether in early July when the whole area became flooded.

Conservation status

During my life time Bitterns have gone from being regarded as a difficult bird to find to a rare bird that is difficult to find and it hasn't been easy to make this distinction. They are still spread from the Far North to Bluff but it has only recently been recognised how thinly they are spread through most of the country. In the early days of settlement Bitterns were much more common than they are now. Their decline has been continuous, as around 90% of swamps have been drained to produce some of New Zealand's best farmland. They were also shot for sport and their feathers were favoured for the tying of trout flies intended to mimic inanga.

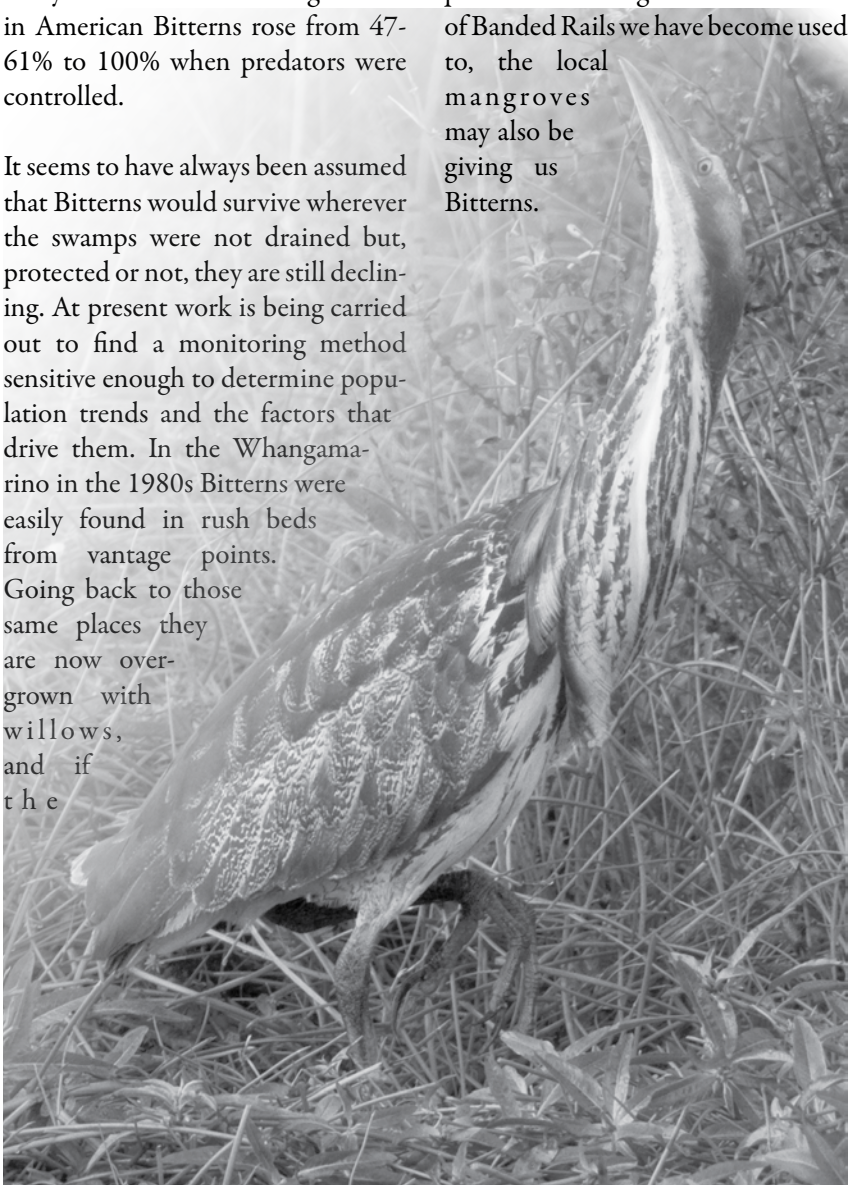
The Australasian Bittern is spread widely in this part of the world with other populations in southern Australia, New Caledonia and Ouvea but New Zealand seems to be the easiest country to find them in. In 1980 it was estimated that we had 580 to 725 Bitterns left in New Zealand. In 2009-10 there was thought to be a remarkably similar number in Australia, somewhere between 247 and 796 but there are thought to be no more than 50 birds left in New Caledonia.

Even though a Bittern was tolerant enough to nest at Miranda sandwiched between the track to the hide and a busy road, they have not coexisted well with humans. A Bittern's large size and slow flight do not favour agility in the air, this doesn't seem to suit the modern world with deaths on the road being too frequently reported.

Their broad platform nests look like good dining tables for ferrets, and perhaps other mustelids. The intimidating and apparently effective defence of the females is no good when they have to leave their nests to feed. The role of predation is not known in New Zealand but similar studies overseas show that eggs, chicks and fledglings at least may be lost to a variety of predators and one study showed that hatching success in American Bitterns rose from 47-61% to 100% when predators were controlled.

It seems to have always been assumed that Bitterns would survive wherever the swamps were not drained but, protected or not, they are still declining. At present work is being carried out to find a monitoring method sensitive enough to determine population trends and the factors that drive them. In the Whangamarino in the 1980s Bitterns were easily found in rush beds from vantage points. Going back to those same places they are now overgrown with willows, and if the Bitterns are still there, they certainly can't be seen. I suspect they have mostly retreated from the edges, like the Fernbirds that used to be there too. I suspect this habitat change to be another impact of highly intensive dairy farming.

More recently there have been a number of records of Bitterns in mangroves from around the wider Auckland area. Bitterns can take up a lot of space. Given their propensity for cover, the recent spread of mangroves may have given them a new safe feeding habitat and the amount of freshwater wetland required to support them in these areas may not necessarily be great. It might fit the way we see them around Miranda but at present it is unknown how important the mangroves are to them. It is possible that along with the numbers of Banded Rails we have become used to, the local mangroves may also be giving us Bitterns.



from the Chair

Gillian Vaughan

It's been a busy summer at Miranda! The construction of the new bird hide bought out an amazing team of volunteers, we've had a volunteer staying at the Centre for a month who has spent a lot of time weeding the shellbanks and collecting flag and band sightings, bitterns have shown up grabbing everyone's attention, the field course has occurred once again.

Centre News

2012 Field Course

The 2012 Field Course was run in the last part of January and once again the course participants appeared to enjoy themselves despite a rather exhausting schedule. It is very easy, even for those of us peripherally involved to underestimate the amount of work that goes into organising these events, and I would like to thank Brigid Glass and Keith Woodley for their efforts in putting this together. The quality of the tutors we have involved is always excellent, and it was particularly pleasing to have Eila Lawton reappear this year, not as an organiser but as a tutor. To any of those considering this course in future I recommend reading a blog by one of this years participants http://shorebirder-waderworld.blogspot.com.au/2012/02/miranda-field-course-2012-nz.html, which should help to convince you!

This year's events

I look forward to seeing many of you at our open day events this year, these are an excellent chance to catch up with friends and look at the birds as well as hear the excellent speakers that we have lined up for the year. The calendar for this year has been emailed to those on the email list and is included with this issue; please feel free to share it with your friends or any organisation that may find it of interest. If you would like a pdf copy to circulate electronically please contact me and I will make it available to you.

Hide and Track Upgrade

On the weekend of December 3rd a group of some 30 people descended on the Centre with hammers. At the end of a damp Sunday the new hide was in place on the shellbank, and over the Christmas break some final touches were completed. Adrian Riegen led the work on the new hide which had been needed for some time and I would like to thank him for that.

Over the same period DoC were involved in rerouting the track lines to improve access to the shoreline in a manner that keeps disturbance to the birds to a minimum, and the landowner and leasee have allowed us to fence some areas of remaining saltmarsh off from grazing. The next steps are to improve signage in the area, with plans for signs on shorebirds and vegetation, and finalise the fenceline and any extra gates needed.

When combined with the earlier carpark upgrade the facilities down at the shoreline have now been significantly upgraded. One pleasing note for me is the number of people who have been involved in these projects, with support from locals, volunteers and DoC. With the way conservation funding is becoming increasingly community focused, building and maintaining these sorts of relationships will be an important part of any community group's effectiveness.

Website

Work has continued on the website, slowing down somewhat for Christmas and because we had our website developer join us on the recent Miranda Field Course. We do however expect to have the ecommerce facilities up shortly, so if you are looking for a book or gift please visit miranda-shorebird.org.nz. Numbers of visitors using the site is increasing slowly, both for new and returning visitors. It is nice to note the number of people who come back to our website in order to see the latest updates is increasing. Recent posts have included pictures of the field course, the hide building, and of course the latest bird sightings.

The hosting for the website is being provided free of charge by Auckland IT company NSP Ltd and I'd like to thank them for their contribution.

Donations

The trust has been fortunate to receive in the last few months several large donations, the two largest have been received to support the work occurring at Yalu Jiang, particularly the production of publications and handouts. The survey work we have been doing at Yalu Jiang has been very important in helping preserve the habitat of the Bar-tailed Godwits on their northward migration. But surveys themselves are never enough, and having the opportunity to increase the educational resources available is very welcome.

With regard to donations, we understand that sometimes people would prefer to donate funds to a particular project, rather than to a general purpose fund. If you would like to discuss what the Trust is working on in order to support a specific project I would be happy to hear from you and make these details available.

We do plan to put these details on our website shortly, and may make a summary available in the magazine for our members general information.

Long term planning
The Trust Council is planning on holding a long term planning meeting in March and if members would like to take the opportunity to outline any thoughts to me so they can be part of our thought process please feel free to email me; gillianv@actrix.co.nz.

Locally

Rays Rest
I am pleased to advise that Hauraki District Council have begun enforcing the boundaries at the camping area at Ray's Rest, and have restricted vehicle access from south of the Reserve fence. While this may mean that birdwatchers have an extra walk to the viewing area at Taramaire we hope that this, combined with the enforcement of dog laws, will increase the use of the area by the birds again. Proper control of freedom campers should also make the area significantly more hygienic!

Auckland
The Auckland Plan has been coming up for consultation in stages over the last year and David Lawrie has been involved in making submissions to council regarding their coastal policies. Recently he has also floated the concept of an Auckland event based around the return of the godwits and held at Ambury Park or another major Auckland location. Whether this proceeds or not is as yet unknown, watch this space!

Internationally

East Asian Australasian Flyway Partnership
The Trust is planning to send a representative to the Flyway Partnership meeting in Indonesia in March. Conserving some of our shorebird species does require international cooperation and events such as these are a chance to ensure the sites that we are worried about in the Yellow Sea are also known to other members. The Department of Conservation will also be sending a representative to the meeting and we hope that this will be the next step forward in working together to protect our migratory waders.

The Flyway Partnership also recently had its first business member join, with Rio Tinto joining due to its association with shorebirds in saltworks.

Yalu Jiang
The Trust does plan to send a team back to Yalu Jiang this May, maintaining the relationship with the reserve staff is important, as is the work that is done at the same time. Sibson Award winner in 2010 Jimmy Choi will also be back at Yalu Jiang in March and April to complete the field work needed for his PhD.

North Korea
The Trust has been asked to put together a proposal to return to North Korea for a second shorebird survey, and Adrian Riegen and David Lawrie have made a request to MFAT for this. The Department of Conservation have indicated they will advise MFAT that they support our proposal.

Working in an area like North Korea is not easy, however the chance to be involved in surveys in places where so little is known is very exciting.

South Korea
On a less exciting note in 2012 work is due to start on a nearly 21 km seawall at Incheon, South Korea, with the aim of building a Tidal Power Station. This will cause the destruction of 19,600 ha of mudflat, some 15% of South Korea's remaining intertidal wetland. David Lawrie made a submission against this project on behalf of the Trust.

To find out more follow the links from www.birdskoreablog.org/?p=2824

Wild New Zealand: From the Road
By Gordon Ell
Review by Michael Taylor

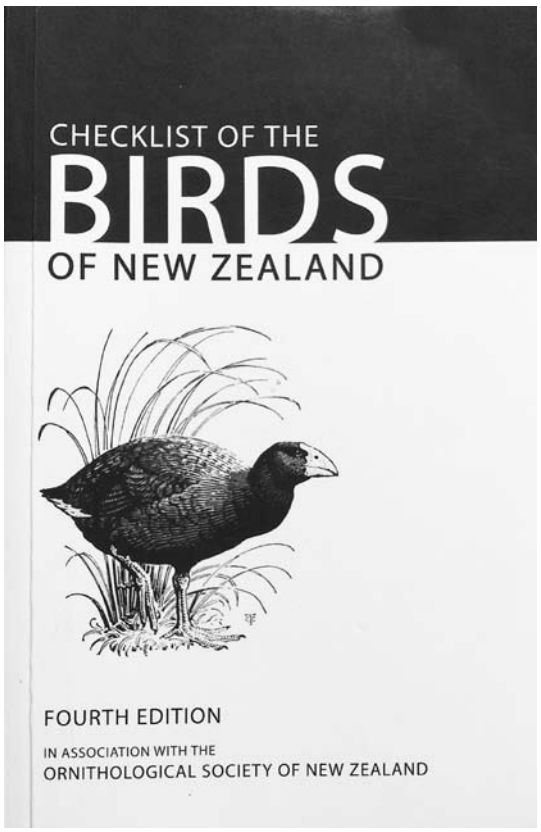
Many of Miranda's visitors are touring the country and on the lookout for handy places to see en route. A new publication from Random House is helpful for this purpose: *Wild New Zealand: From the Road* aims not only to increase the enjoyment of those travelling by car but also to draw attention to conservation issues along the way. In the process, the book focuses on the varied landscapes seen from the road together with scenic features, rare plants or special bird haunts reached by a short walk. Its approach should serve both tourists and residents. The author and photographer is Gordon Ell, a former President of Forest & Bird and ONZM recipient for his services to journalism and conservation, who draws on his countrywide exploration of the natural environment to act as guide. This handbook forms a nice companion in the search for fresh sights or in locating spots you have always meant to visit.

Checklist of the Birds of New Zealand, Norfolk and Macquarie Islands, and the Ross Dependency. (4th ed.) 2010.

Checklist Committee, Ornithological Society of New Zealand and Te Papa Press, Wellington. 500 pp $99.00

Review by Keith Woodley

For some people it was a much-anticipated moment. At a ceremony during the OSNZ annual conference in 2010 at Nelson, a rather significant publishing event was duly marked. Officially launched was a somewhat solid looking paperback, although not one destined to appear at airport bookstores: indeed, a volume unlikely to appear in a bestseller list anytime soon. Its cover bore the stylish Takahe so familiar to many as the OSNZ logo, but its contents some 500 pages of them – presented a formidable challenge to the general reader. For page after page of typeface – much of it merely strings of Latin names, he or she would have found nothing in the way of characterisation or plot development, and certainly no illustrations.



Yet the appearance of this completely revised edition of the official New Zealand checklist of birds was most welcome. Since the last edition appeared in 1990, so much has happened to bird taxonomy to render it much outdated. As the authors observe, the earlier trend towards 'lumping' together certain taxa has now reversed in favour of 'splitting' or establishing further taxa. 'The molecular biology revolution, with its ability to establish ever-finer differences, and pressure for the conservation of genetic diversity, are forcing the recognition of more and more species, often by the elevation of subspecific taxa to specific level.' Thus this new publication lists 435 species compared with 379 in the 1990 edition: if subspecies are included the list rises from 448 in 1990 to 491. But this dramatic increase is due not just to molecular research: there appears to be, at first glance, territorial aggrandizement at the expense of Australia. In a significant departure from previous Checklists, this one includes Norfolk Island on the grounds that, while it is Australian territory, it is biogeographically part of the New Zealand region, as is Macquarie Island, also included here. Our region also incorporates the Kermadecs, Chathams and the subantarctic islands. In a continuation from the 1990 edition, the Ross Dependency is also included here.

A further feature of the book might also, at first glance, leave one with a degree of apprehension as to the outcome: this is a book produced by a committee. It is of course an old adage that designing things by committee may sometimes produce less than effective results. But quite the contrary in this case, for the strengths of this volume derive from those very origins: it is fruit of the collective ruminations of eight people, each eminent in their own way in the field of New Zealand ornithology. And spirited debates, along with a wealth of contentious issues are longstanding features in the world of the taxonomist, not the least being how best to define species boundaries. 'The debate boils down to finding the best and most practical way to impose a discontinuous classification scheme on generally uncooperative subjects and providing a sound theoretical basis for doing so.' Wisely the authors have adopted a conservative approach in this rapidly changing field.

If you have ever wondered why bird families are listed in a particular order in the *Field Guide to Birds of New Zealand* as well in many other bird books, it is because such books follow the taxonomic order laid out in the Checklist. Thus the current Field Guide begins with Kiwi, followed by the Grebes and Albatrosses and ends with Magpie and Rook. This new Checklist however, appears to upset some of that orthodoxy. Like its predecessor it begins with the ratites – hence Moa species followed by Kiwi as the first extant family, but then comes the Quail followed by

the Ducks, with the Grebes appearing between the latter and the Penguins. But in making these changes, the new volume brings our taxonomy into line with current thinking based on genetic and other work reported since 1990.

The book lists all relevant synonyms – science names by which a species has been known over the years – and in some cases they are surprisingly numerous. But hidden behind these arcane lists there is much history; stories from the Age of Discovery and beyond, tales of colourful personalities and irascible naturalists, not to mention clashes between rivals. The first two entries under Caspian Tern, for example, are *Sterna caspia* Pallas 1770 and *Sterna Tschegrava* Lepechin 1770. But beside the second one is the entry: "Suppressed and invalid'. In the sometime arcane world of the taxonomists there occur, from time to time, minor eruptions over correct nomenclature and order of priority. Thus the Caspian tern was named *Sterna caspia* by one of the greatest naturalists of the eighteenth century, Peter Simon Pallas in 1770. However, in the same work in which Pallas's description appeared there also occurred reference to the same bird but named *Sterna tschegrava* by Russian naturalist Ivan Lepekhin. In the nineteenth century an attempt was made to change the name from '*caspia*' because '*tschegrava*' had 'priority by several pages.' Redoubtable New Zealand ornithologist Walter Buller was having none of this, summarily dispatching the idea thus: 'the word is not only barbarous, but exceedingly cacophonous, and especially as *caspia* has become so well established by common consent, I do not think it would be expedient to supersede Pallas's name in view of the very slight priority of that of Lepechin." Incidentally, this species has now elevated to its own genus and is *Hydroprogne caspia*.

There is irony in the entry for a species named after Buller himself. In 1855 Bruch declared the Black-billed Gull to be different to the Red-billed and named it *Larus Gavia hartlaubii.* Buller meanwhile, had also decided it was a different species describing it as *Bruchigavia melanorhynchus* – a Greek compound meaning Black-billed. But elsewhere in the world both names had already been applied to other taxa, so in 1871 Frederick Hutton– who seemed to have often been at odds with Buller in the science debates of the times – named it *Larus bulleri* by which it is known today.

Species now extinct but which continued until the time of human settlement are included in the main checklist, while those known from fossils older than the mid-Pleistocene are recorded in an appendix. A second appendix lists the astonishingly large number of species for which attempts were made to introduce them to New Zealand. Predictably many of these were game birds – such as quail or pheasants, and most failed to establish. Thus Golden Pheasant, Temmincks Tragopan, Greater Prairie Chicken and Lesser Snow Goose will not feature in the gun sights of modern hunters. Nor will that singular symbol of a certain product of Scotland, Red Grouse. In some regions our common bird fauna today is dominated by exotic colour in the form of House Sparrow, Yellowhammer, Greenfinch, Goldfinch or Chaffinch. Among the passerine introductions that failed, that otherwise would have added considerable further colour, were Blue Tit, Blackcap, Eurasian Robin, Bullfinch, Common Nightingale and Summer Tanager.
So who needs this book? For people with a passing interest in birds there will be little here, but for those with a deeper interest, there may be a surprising amount. It is, of course, an essential reference item for anyone engaged in serious study of our bird fauna, and well worth the not inconsiderable expense. It is also likely to remain the definitive work for some time to come.

A White Christmas at Duder Regional Park

Long term readers may remember a cover picture of Miranda News that was an all white Variable Oystercatcher. That bird was nicknamed "Blanche" and is now regularly seen at Kawakawa Bay and the nearby oyster farm. This news came in from Mag Ramsey just after Christmas 2011.

"Well as you can see from the picture, the Bibbys at Duder have done it again, and produced their third (that I know about) white chick... hatched on Xmas Day, so naturally known as Angel. The other egg still hasn't hatched as of this morning, but as this was the case last year too with their third egg hatching a good 3 days after the first too, who knows, we may yet get another."

The Bibbys are a Variable Oystercatcher pair which has nested at Duder Regional Park for a number of years. Both birds have a white patch under their throat.

This season had seven Variable Oystercatcher pairs and 5 New Zealand Dotterel Pairs at Duder. Duder Regional Park is one of Auckland's coastal farm park and is well worth a visit.

"Angel" newly hatched.
Photo Mags Ramsey

from the Manager

Keith Woodley

The text I had just sent Kristelle, as she made her way down to the hide, was a mundane matter related to the next scheduled cannon-netting. Her reply trumped mundane. "I am looking at bittern chicks right now!' In the context of breeding species at Miranda in recent times, this news was astounding. That this sighting was occurring just 200 metres south of the Shorebird Centre was even more so. Yet, at the same time some things now started to make sense.

During my time here, records of bittern have been few and far between, with usually months or even years separating each sighting. Several times over the years I encountered one in dense vegetation near the old track to Access Bay. Another time I watched one standing in the middle of dairy pasture near the Hot Springs; the normal bittern stand-erect-in-frozen posture can be most effective amidst tall vegetation, but somewhat less so in grass less than 100 mm high. On an even more memorable occasion I remember being distracted from my morning coffee by a bird stalking around the edges of Widgery Lake, the whole affair taking place in slow motion, like a time-lapse ballet. With its head and neck slightly extended, the bird raised a foot, paused, and then gradually extended its leg horizontally before slowly lowering the foot. One object of this performance may have been the pond's frog community. Now and again a bird was reported flying across the road, anywhere between Kaiaua and Waitakaruru. Taken together, these sightings suggested one or more birds moving around the place. But the long intervals between sightings, together with what seemed to be limited suitable habitat in the area, gave little indication the species could become resident.

During the second half of 2011 however, bittern sightings gradually became more frequent. The last issue of Miranda news reported a spate of sightings in August. Walking to the hide on two occasions I flushed a bird from the mangrove fringes alongside the track. Each time, the bird rose from a slightly different area but then flew north a hundred metres or so before going down in the general vicinity of the pools near the start of the track. There followed a couple of sightings from the pools opposite our mail box. Then in late November came a number of sightings of a bittern flying back and forth over the Centre: the farm drains behind the two cottages appeared to be one destination, the coastal side of the road the other. In the second week of December, a party of French birders reported watching a bittern acting as if it was near a nest. The location, the pools immediately south of the Centre, was an extensive area of tall, thick vegetation – so subsequent attempts to confirm nesting were unsuccessful. Until three days later when Kris found herself eye-balling four chicks immediately over the roadside fence. The ultimate outcome for this bittern family is unclear, but when first seen the chicks were almost fully developed so it is quite possible all fledged.

It has also been a good season for Banded Rail. While they have yet to return to Widgery Lake, there have been regular sightings of adults and young from both the "Bittern Pools' and the Stilt Ponds, especially in the vicinity of the carpark gate.

* * * * *

It was the first field session of the 2012 Field Course – wader watch on the evening tide. Of course it was also the first to be held at the new hide. Before us there was the usual activity as some birds - Wrybill, godwits, knots and stilts foraged on the inner flats, as others massed together on the shellbanks beyond. Then a stranger was spotted. Apart from its relative size - smaller than a godwit but larger than a knot, two key features were immediately evident; a dark crown bisected by a pale stripe, and a slightly de-curved bill. Overall, the gorgeous evening light accentuated its buffy-golden tinge. Standing in a mud runnel, it remained alert, looking about nervously, as if wondering where it was. If so, it was a good question, for this Little Whimbrel *(Numenius minute*) should presumably have been somewhere in northern Australia or New Guinea, where the bulk of the population of this tundra breeder spend the northern winter. While the species is more commonly associated with grasslands, in New Zealand, where it is described as an 'uncommon but possibly annual visitor', it has been found on estuaries or coastal lakes throughout the country. However when it does occur in this country it also picks up a new name; we call it Little Whimbrel but elsewhere it is known as Little Curlew. Whatever it was doing at Miranda that evening, it clearly chose not to linger as it has not been seen again. Nor am I aware of any other sightings elsewhere.

Pictures on facing page Hide Building from Saturday morning to Sunday Afternoon. We built the hide at the Centre, then shifted it on parts to the shellbank where it was reassembled. Pictures Sharon Graham, Heather Rogers and Keith Woodley

The field course itself went extremely well this year. In particular the weather remained most agreeable throughout, sparing us the major disruptions of last year. It also marked the return of an old Miranda hand. Former Miranda council member John Charteris had been involved with the first few courses, before moving on to other things. His role was then taken up by Bill Brownell, but with Bill unavailable this year, we were grateful John could fill the gap. He led the group in an excellent and enthusiastically received session which began in Waharau Regional Park and ended on a hill above Back Miranda Road. In between, participants received a thorough overview of the Firth of Thames, and how Miranda and its coastal margins fit into the overall geological-ecological scheme of things.

* * * * *

Two months on, the new hide continues to get good reviews. Visitor numbers this season appear to be similar to previous years, so the new facility has been well used. It is particularly well placed to watch the big flocks assembling from mid-tide onwards, with good numbers of all species foraging in front of it. Nevertheless, the old hide also continues to serve us well. The bend in the creek immediately in front of it remains a much-used ablution block for many birds – particularly wrybill and knot, while large sections of the wrybill flock, along with New Zealand dotterel and an assortment of others, continue to frequent the shell fan nearest the hide. Consequently we are finding people dividing their time between the two. Which leads us to the view that maybe the old hide will not be moved after all. One possibility is to leave it where it is and create another facility, perhaps just a shelter of some sort, nearer the Stilt Ponds.
However, leaving the old hide in place presents us with a problem. Standing beside it and looking at the new hide, the logical route (and the shortest distance) for people to travel is directly along the top of the bank, which means they are in full view of any birds on the innermost flats. Consequently the new track between the hides will loop into the paddock, and away from this sensitive area. At the very least we will need good signage and track markers to ensure people follow it.

The new track from the carpark to the hide. Photo Keith Woodley

"Life Members" of the New Zealand Wader Study Group

The wader catch on the Miranda Field Course was small, but included several birds of note. For the record books we caught one Bar-tailed Godwit originally banded as an adult at Miranda in 1993 which is therefore now at least 21years and 6 months old, the oldest known godwit in NZ. Keeping it company was another godwit at least 15 years old, and one at least 17 years and 6 months old. Prior to this catch the oldest NZWSG godwit recaptures were a single godwit of at least 17 years old and two at 16 years minimum.

On the same day we also caught one Red Knot that we banded as an adult in 1996 so that is now at least 18 years and 6 months old, almost our oldest knot. The NZWSG also has records of one knot possibly over 19 years, but its history was unclear as its band was worn. We have one other recapture of a knot of at least 18 years, and one of at least 17 years old.

Not satisfied with that Field Course participants also caught one Wrybill that is at least 19 years old. To date the oldest known age Wrybill caught by the NZSWG was at least twenty years old. With the bird caught on the 26th of January there are now 5 Wrybill that were recaptured that are at least 19 years old and 7 at 18 years old. **UPDATE 11/2/2012** A Wrybill was caught that was first banded as an adult in 1992, making it at least 22 years old!

Overseas records do get older, the BTO shows their oldest godwit must be at least 33 years 11 months, while their oldest Red Knot 27 years three months. They do not however have a better Wrybill record than ours!

Visit http://blx1.bto.org/ring/countyrec/results 2010/longevity.htm for more longevity records.

Keep up-to-date with events visit
www.miranda-shorebird.org.nz

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Bequests

Remember the Miranda Naturalists' Trust in your will and ensure that our vital work in education and protection of the migratory shorebirds can continue. For further information and a copy of our legacy letter contact the Shorebird Centre.

Situated on the Firth of Thames between Kaiaua and the Miranda Hot Pools, the Miranda Shorebird Centre provides a base for birders right where the birds are. The best time to see the birds is two to three hours either side of high tide. The Miranda high tide is 30 minutes before the Auckland (Waitemata) tide. Drop in to investigate, or come and stay a night or two.

Accommodation

The Shorebird Centre has bunkrooms for hire and two self-contained units:

Per bed / night member $ 20.00 Per bed / night non-member $ 25.00
Hire of self-contained unit member $ 65.00 Hire of unit non-member $ 85.00
For further information contact the Shorebird Centre, RD3 Pokeno 2473
Phone /Fax (09) 232 2781 Email: shorebird@farmside.co.nz

Help support the Trust's efforts to educate and promote awareness.

Membership of the Trust entitles you to:
Four Miranda News issues per year.
A discount on overnight accommodation
Invitations to Trust Events
The right to attend the AGM
The right to vote for council members

Membership Rates :

Ordinary Member - $ 45.00
Family Member - $ 55.00
Overseas Member- $ 60.00
Life Member, under 50 - $ 1300
Life Member, 50 & over - $ 750

Want to be involved?

Friends of Miranda

A volunteer group which helps look after the Shorebird Centre. If you'd like to help out contact Keith. Helping out can be anything from assisting with the shop, school groups or meeting people down at the shellbanks. Regular days for volunteer training are held, the next scheduled day is Saturday October 22, 2011. Contact Maria for details.

Long term Volunteers

Spend four weeks or more on the shoreline at Miranda. If you are interested in staffing the visitor centre, helping with school groups or talking to people on the shellbank for a few weeks contact Keith to discuss options. Free accommodation is available in one of the bunkrooms. Use of a bicycle will be available.

Firth of Thames Census

Run by OSNZ and held twice a year the Census days are a good chance to get involved with ongoing field work and research. If you can't make the Firth Census contact OSNZ for census days in your area.

Contribute to the Magazine

If you've got something you've written, a piece of research, a poem or a great photo send it in to MNT News. If you want to discuss your ideas contact Gillian Vaughan, gillianv@actrix.co.nz.

Help in the Miranda Garden

We can always use some spare hands in the Miranda Garden, be it a half hours weeding or more ambitious projects. While our formal gardening program has ceased if you do have some spare time while around the Centre please feel free to do any garden maintenance you can see needs doing! Ask at the desk for ides, or adopt a patch and call it your own.

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