

# NEW ZEALAND WADER STUDY GROUP

*In association with*

Miranda Naturalists' Trust

Newsletter No 10

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Compiled by Adrian Riegen

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## Comment

One of NZWSG's regular volunteers, Tom Barton, left New Zealand in May to return home to the USA. He was very active on the Auckland birding scene for seven years. We shall miss his regular and knowledgeable contribution on banding days and wish him well in the USA.

## Oldest Wrybill

In the catch of Wrybill at Miranda in March 1997, four were found to have been first banded in 1980 at Miranda. These are now the oldest known Wrybill at ages of 17 years plus.

## Tuamotu Sandpiper Still Alive

Early on the morning of 16 March 1997 we landed on a motu called Toreatai, part of the uninhabited atoll of Tahanea in the Tuamotu Archipelago of French Polynesia.

Barely 100 metres in diameter, this circular motu was vegetated primarily with coconut trees, pandanus, scaevola, and beach heliotrope. It was home to a mass of breeding seabirds - Lesser Frigatebirds, Red-footed Boobies, White Terns, and Brown and Black Noddies - all in the latter stages of their breeding cycles. However, the bird that this party of mainly British birders had come to find was the Tuamotu Sandpiper, a rarely observed wader, now restricted to a few uninhabited atolls in the Tuamotu Archipelago. The Tuamotu Sandpiper is a small dark brown wader, about the size of a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper with a creamy white supercilium and a small pointed bill.

We observed 3 Tuamotu Sandpipers on Toreatai. They spent much of the time hopping around in the bare branches of the trees. At other times they were on the ground, poking around amongst the ground vegetation and the leaf litter for insects. They were unafraid of us and happily inspected the camera bags and backpacks

that were lying on the ground.

One Bristle-thighed Curlew was also observed on the motu and at least 7 were seen on neighbouring Noiokao, together with another Tuamotu Sandpiper.

## Pam and Des Agnew

## Annual Report Of NZWSG Banding 1996-97

The 1996-97 banding year was much more successful than the previous one, although efforts in March to catch Knots close to migration were thwarted by the weather and the vast flocks of Pied Oystercatchers at Miranda, who insist on being in on the action! Some very useful data were collected and the catch of Turnstone at Karaka was especially rewarding as, prior to that, only 18 had been banded in New Zealand. Bad weather during the Ornithological Society of New Zealand (OSNZ) Kaipara Field Study Week (the tail end of another cyclone) meant that we were unable to cannon net as planned. Instead, we carried out a session of mist-netting one night at Taporā. After several hours we eventually caught a handful of waders, including 3 Bar-tailed Godwit, 1 Pied Oystercatcher, and 3 Banded Dotterels. We have also started night mist-netting on the Manukau, with Tony Habraken's local knowledge proving very valuable. While mist-netting generally yields only small numbers of birds, fewer people are required and tide heights are not as critical as for cannon netting. As a result, species difficult to cannon net can be targeted.

During the season ten attempted catches were made of which nine were successful. A total of 1,882 birds of 9 species was captured, including 179 retraps. One new species was added to the banding list this year, a single Spur-wing tailed Godwit (343). The total of birds captured since 1987 now stands at 10,807 and since 1979, 14,199.

**Table 1**

Species	New	Retraps	Total
Lesser Knot	874	29	903
Wrybill	229	144	373
Bar-tailed Godwit	340	3	343
Pied Oystercatcher	172	1	173
Turnstone	66	0	66
Banded Dotterel	19	0	19
New Zealand Dotterel	1	2	3
Curlew Sandpiper	1	0	1
Spur-winged Plover	1	0	1
Totals	1,703	179	1,882

White leg flags were fitted to Bar-tailed Godwit, Lesser Knot (all sites), and Pied Oystercatcher (Miranda only). One Pied Oystercatcher was fitted with a yellow flag at Tapora. Yellow will be used only on Oystercatchers captured on the Kaipara. We will continue to leg-flag long-distance migrants in the coming years and hope that this will yield valuable sightings of our birds elsewhere in New Zealand, as well as overseas. (See NZWSG News #9 for details of flag sightings.)

Overseas flag sightings for the year include:  
 3 Bar-tailed Godwit West Coast, South Korea  
 1 Lesser Knot West Coast, South Korea  
 (See later this newsletter)

Recoveries included:

6 Lesser Knot from Australia as reported in Newsletter #8

Bird 051-08574 banded at Queenscliff, Victoria on 05.04.81 by VWSG and retrapped at Miranda on 20.10.96 by NZWSG is the oldest known Lesser Knot in Australasia at just over 16 years.

Of particular interest were the weights of two Turnstones mist-netted at Karaka on 5 April 1997. One weighed 160g and the other 198g, making the latter one of the heaviest Turnstone caught anywhere. No doubt it was preparing for a very long flight.

Our thanks for financial support and equipment go to the Banding Office and the Miranda Naturalists' Trust. As ever we are especially grateful to the Jordans and to Alan Lane for allowing access to their land. Of course, we also thank the many people who participated in the group's activities throughout the season and look forward to their support in the 1997-98 season. It has been encouraging to see so many new faces this year.

**Stephen Davies & Adrian Riegen**

## Flag Sightings from South Korea

A very interesting new development in unravelling the migration story of Knot and Godwit has unfolded with the sighting in April and May 1997 of three white flagged Bar-tailed Godwit and one Lesser Knot at two different sites on the west coast of South Korea. They were seen by two Korean bird researchers, Ki-Seop Lee and Jin-Young Park, at Namyang Bay (37° OS'N, 126°45'E) and Dongjin Estuary (35°49'N, 126°42'E). These are the first sightings from Korea of birds flagged in New Zealand.

Mark Barter, who was in China to observe and count waders coming through from Australasia, feels that the west coast of Korea could prove to be an important area for waders from New Zealand. These sightings seem to indicate this is possible. There have also been several sightings from nearby Southern Japan. These suggest that waders from New Zealand may be using an easterly route through East Asia when migrating north.



## Chongming Dao, Shanghai

Chongming Dao and neighbouring coastal areas of China around Shanghai are very important for waders migrating to and from the Arctic. Six Lesser Knot banded in New Zealand have been recovered in the area. It was thought to be a major staging area for waders, but recent studies by Mark Barter and others in 1996 and 1997 indicate that the birds stopping there quickly head north to the Yellow River Delta and Shuanglaizi Estuary, as well as to the west coast of Korea. From there they make the final flight to the breeding grounds. Janie Vaughan, a New Zealander and Miranda Naturalists' Trust member now living in China, recently joined Mark Barter and company for several days on Chongming Dao.

## **Chongming Dao (Island) Shanghai - A Personal View**

I turned my gaze from the mud flats that extended into the haze to watch a water buffalo being ridden past us by a regal Chinese sitting side saddle. He turned and smiled as the beast moved rapidly away. The photo opportunity was gone before my camera was out of its bag. Mark Barter continued to talk as though nothing unusual was taking place.

For him it may not be unusual. Fifteen hundred oxen graze these mud flats alongside migrating shorebirds. For nine days in April 1997 a team, funded by Environment Australia, was also on the mud flats. They were to discover more about the number of waders present, what habitats were available to them, and who else was using this most eastern part of Chongming Dao at the mouth of the Yangtze or, as the Chinese know it, Chang Jiang, The Long River.

The hard-working team was comprised of Mark Barter from AWSG, Dale Tonkinson, on holiday from Victoria, Mung Xian Min, the technical officer from Wetlands International China Programme, Tang Sixian from the Biology Department of Agriculture of East China Normal University, Ms Kong Yi from the CITES office of the Department of Agriculture in Shanghai Municipality, and Zhu Shu Yu, a research officer for the Yellow River Delta Nature Reserve. Thanks to the efforts of Keith Woodley, Adrian Riegen, and Mark, I was fortunate enough to join the last three days of this part of the study. After leaving the island, they were taking a 17 hour train trip to the Yellow River Delta.

The team estimate that 200,000 waders are using these mud flats on their journey from the Southern Hemisphere to their Arctic breeding grounds. The birds are stopping in at Chongming Dao, not to fatten up, but for a rest and a little snack before proceeding on their journey. Some of them may be viewed in relative comfort from the banks of crab and fish ponds built in the land reclaimed in 1991. The more challenging part for me was those mud flats that the buffalo had distracted me from.

We donned chest-high waders and scuttled down the sea wall into the mud. At first the going was easy, following a dryish path which soon deteriorated into a six inch trough of water from which I learnt not to stray. The first time I did was to take a photo of the team, but when I wanted to move back to the track and was rocking to get my feet released from the grip of the mud, I sat down, plop! Mud provides a soft landing. Another time

I blithely told Tung that I could follow him off the path. Seven metres later he had to haul me out of the glutinous goop! These experiences increased enormously my respect for the physical work the team was doing.

Not only had they trudged through varying depths of mud to count the birds but they had also interviewed many people who were using the mud flats to make a living. These people naturally were wary of others, who could be tax men asking questions!

Catching eels is the most profitable occupation, but this year the eel harvest was less than half of last year. Fishermen also constantly cross the mud flats and others search them for snails, molluscs, and crabs. Hunters are estimated to catch 20,000 of the migrating birds annually. The buffalo feed on the mud for six months of the year and reed cutters harvest large quantities each year for the making of quality paper. The team agreed that much more work was needed to discover the impact of these uses on the waders. At present there is talk of extending the sea wall another couple of kilometres into the mud flats, as well as making the area into a nature reserve. The information collected by the team on impacts will be very valuable for the decision making process.

Over the nine days the team recorded 86 species of birds and they weren't even looking for land birds. The list included the rare Nordmann's Greenshank, Black-faced Spoonbill, Saunder's Gull, and Spoon-billed Sandpiper (three in one day).

This is a fascinating area, only a couple of hours (including ferry ride) out of Shanghai. We stayed in a very comfortable 2 star hotel for about \$28 per room per night and were served large quantities of very good Chinese food. The hotel had a bus which transported us the short distances we needed to go. I have to return, not only to deliver prints of photos I took to friendly and curious local people, but to wander the canals ponds and paddocks, as well as the mud, enjoying the total Chinese rural scene.

The area shows great promise for eco-tourists, or if you want to be involved with the ongoing surveying, bring yourself and maybe some Department of Conservation funding! Maybe you will meet a Miranda bird.

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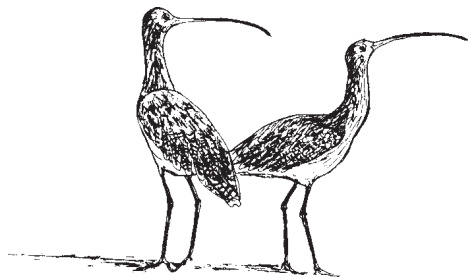
## Tracking Eastern Curlews by Satellite

Satellite transmitters have been used to study the northward migration of Eastern Curlews (*Numenius madagascariensis*) from Moreton Bay, Queensland. This is the first phase of a broader study into the ecology and movements of the species.

This report is an update, and perhaps the final chapter of the first phase, but if the batteries last there may be more surprises in store.

The work is being undertaken by the Wild Bird Society of Japan and the Queensland Wader Study Group with support from the Queensland Department of Environment. The project is funded by the governments of Australia and Japan, and assisted by the Japanese telecommunications company NTT. American and Japanese PTIs are being used.

Further details on the project can be viewed on an NTT WEB page <http://www.wnn.or.jp/wnn-migrant/english/index.html>



Sketch by Keith Woodley

Cyclone Justin in the Coral Sea (the largest for 15 years) influenced the progress of six of the birds that left in early to mid March, 1997 from Moreton Bay. All of these birds made it as far as south eastern Papua New Guinea but no further. Two have returned to Moreton Bay, one is near Princess Charlotte Bay on Cape York Peninsula (north Queensland), and one remains in Papua New Guinea. One bird has perished and another almost certainly has, having been located in the eye of the cyclone for several days until contact was lost. The other six birds departed over the period up until the first week in April. They moved in a more westerly route - out to sea from the Queensland coast and towards the Central Cordillera of New Guinea - presumably because they were not under the same influence of cyclonic north and north easterly winds. One bird made a conservative return flight of under 700 km to the Great Sandy Strait (another important coastal wetland north of Moreton Bay) but the other five have made substantial flights.

One flew to the north of Papua New Guinea but returned to Moreton Bay within a week. Another flew as far as the Caroline Islands (7° North), then returned to Moreton Bay via New Ireland and the southeast coast of Papua New Guinea over a period of more than a

month, with a final direct flight from Papua New Guinea to south eastern Queensland of 1800 km. Of the remaining three birds, two made it to Russia. One is ensconced within the breeding range in the Arum Region (50° North, 130° East). Signals from the second of these two birds are weak but it is located somewhere farther to the east and may be moving around. The third bird to

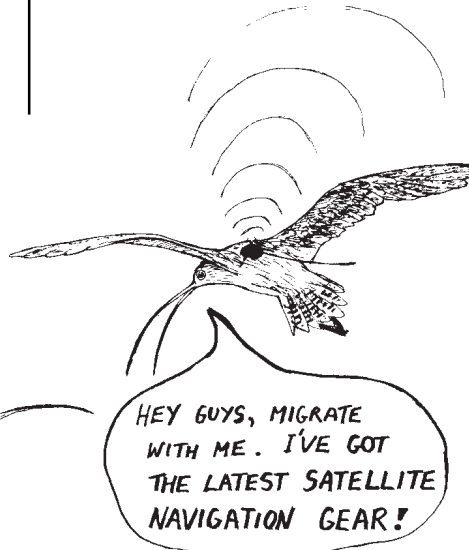
have made it well into the northern hemisphere recorded a dramatic 6,500+ km non-stop flight from Moreton Bay but contact was lost somewhere to the east of Taiwan. We hope this is because the transmitter fell off (they are designed to do so in due course), not because the bird died.

By about mid May, all long distance flights

had ceased with combined flight distances for all twelve birds of over 60,000 km. Five birds are back in their over wintering quarters on their home patch, two are well within the breeding range, one is in North Queensland, another in Papua New Guinea, two have perished and the other, hopefully, lost its back-pack.

Kind regards to all and thanks to the curlews.

Dr Peter Driscoll, Chairperson Queensland Wader Study Group



**Any articles for this publication or any bird sightings of banded or flagged birds should go to -**

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