

NEW ZEALAND

WADER STUDY GROUP

in association with

Miranda Naturalists' Trust

Newsletter No 7

-August 1996-

Compiled by Adrian Riegen

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COMMENT

It is a considerable time since the last newsletter. Work commitments and a very busy 21st year at Miranda have taken their toll. However many thanks to all those who have sent in contributions for this issue.

International News - Clive Minton led the most successful north-west Australia wader expedition to date during March-April 1996. Sadly no New Zealanders were among the 81 participants on this expedition. A total of 8092 waders of 29 species and 360 gulls and terns were banded, including 1592 Bar-tailed Godwit, 1582 Great Knot, 1354 Red-necked Stint and 509 Red Knot. Four of the birds were recovered overseas while the expedition was still in progress, from Hong Kong, Korea, Taiwan and Japan.

Adrian Riegen

NOTES FROM THE TATTLER 7 APRIL 1996

Mark Barter and Dale Tonkinson of the AWSG ran a workshop at Chongming Dao, Shanghai, China, for 14 Chinese biologists, between March 25 - April 16. This gave them the opportunity to collect valuable data on wetland status, shorebird counts and arrival masses for waders flying non-stop from north-west Australia, where there was the concurrent AWSG banding expedition run by Clive Minton.

Highlights and results included:

- A complete count of the eastern end of the island over a six day period (25-31 March). This gave a total of 24,770 waders of 29 species, including 794 Eastern Curlews.
- Great Knot were arriving with a body mass, on average, less than 50% of departure masses from north-west Australia. Average mass of Great Knot

was 130g (range 98=163); two Great Knot weighed <100g (average non-breeding mass = 137g).

- None of the 36 Bar-tailed Godwit caught exceeded the non-breeding mass for the respective sex (i.e. female 292g; male 265g). Arriving females averaged 249g (range 215-280), males averaged 211g (range 155-240). Average departure masses are female 419g; male 350g.
- There were 11 controls of Australian banded birds, mostly from north-west Australia, but one Bar-tailed Godwit from Brisbane.
- During the visit we saw/or banded 38 wader species. We banded 309 birds of 20 species, including one Nordmann's Greenshank.
- Reclamation of Chongming Dao continues apace, but can't keep up with the accretion from the Yangtze River. Perhaps the Three Gorges Scheme will end this happy situation.

BANDING RECOVERIES

The past few months have been very productive in terms of international band recoveries and white flag sightings for the NZWSG.

Red Knot

C-46086 banded - Jordans, Kaipara Harbour, 36°34'S - 174°20'E on 22.12.91 as an adult - recovered - Chongming, (Shanghai), China 31°40'N - 121°50'E 10.04.95 by Qian Fawen.

Bird taken for food. Minimum distance travelled 9270 km. Time elapsed 3 years 4 months.

Bar-tailed Godwit

Y-5882 banded - Jordans, Kaipara Harbour, 36°30'S - 174°20'E on 18.12.94 as an adult male - recovered - Akita Prefecture, (north-west Honshu), Japan, 39°27'N - 140°34'E on 24.05.96 by A Mitamura.

Found dead - hit power lines. Minimum distance travelled 9040 km. Time elapsed 1 year 5 months.

Wrybill

B-5157 banded - Taramarie, Firth of Thames, 37°10' - 175°20' on 21.04.92 - recovered - Taramarie. 21.02.96 by M Hanger.

Found sick on shell bank. Died shortly after. Time elapsed 3 years 10 months.



A Wrybill at Miranda

Photo: Jim Hague

BAR-TAILED GODWIT WHITE FLAG SIGHTING

One bird seen on 6.4.96 at Gannosa in Hakata Bay, Fukuoka, Japan, 33°40'N - 130°30'E, via Nial Moores. Minimum distance travelled 8880 km, if flagged at Jordans

We now have three flag sightings in three years from three sites in south-west Japan. It now seems likely that Japan is an important stop over region for New Zealand godwits during northward migration, although as they don't see very large flocks in these places, there may be a high turn over rate with birds only stopping for a few days. As yet we have no recoveries or flag sightings from China.

SHORE PLOVER - ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ENDANGERED SHORE PLOVER ON MOTUORA ISLAND

The New Zealand Shore Plover (*Thinornis novaeseelandiae*) is an endangered species found as a single population numbering between 40 and 45 breeding pairs only on Rangatira, a small island in the Chatham Islands. Concern for the Shore Plover's longterm survival led to the development of a recovery plan for the species, that included among a number of key management actions, the establishment of a second population using captive

bred stock. A captive breeding population was set up in 1992 at the Mt Bruce National Wildlife Centre, and later expanded to include Peacock Springs in Canterbury.

A number of locations suitable for the (re)introduction of Shore Plovers were considered, but Motuora Island in the Hauraki Gulf and Mana Island in Cook Strait were selected as the top priorities. Both Motuora and Mana Islands are considered to have suitable shore habitat, and mammalian predators are absent. It is unlikely that Shore Plover would survive for any length of time or breed successfully in habitats with mammalian predators.

A trial release of five Shore Plovers on Motuora Island in September 1994 was not successful in establishing birds on the island. An unexpected problem was encountered with Morepork predated Shore Plover (Moreporks are not found on the Chatham's), and at least two of the five Shore Plovers flew off from the island.

There was a second attempt to establish Shore Plovers on Motuora in September 1995 when 16 birds were released after being held in aviaries on Motuora Island for one month. Unfortunately Shore Plover numbers declined rapidly to four birds, with a good proportion of birds leaving the island for mainland beaches (Pakiri, Wenderholm, Waiwera, Orewa). At least two birds were predated, probably by Moreporks. It was then decided to change the time of year when Shore Plover were released in the hope that birds would be less inclined to wander from Motuora Island. Shore Plovers in the Chatham's are sedentary and generally do not leave Rangatira Island, but it is not known whether this is typical behaviour of the species or whether in historic times Shore Plovers did disperse or migrate seasonally.

A further 16 Shore Plovers were released on Motuora Island in February 1996. This time a greater proportion of birds remained on the island, and a month after the February release there were 16 birds present (a mix of birds from the last two releases). However, Shore Plovers then began to leave Motuora Island for mainland beaches or disappeared. By April only eight birds remained on the island.

The biggest obstacle to overcome in establishing Shore Plovers on Motuora Island is establishing site fidelity. Various techniques have been proposed to overcome this problem, including holding a 'call bird' in captivity to act as a drawcard for wild Shore Plovers, or breeding Shore Plovers in captivity on the island. Work needs to continue on the impact of Morepork predation or Morepork harassment of Shore Plovers. Although Moreporks may not predate Shore Plovers to the extent that it was originally predicted, even a low level of predation could be crucial in establishing Shore Plovers

on Motuora Island. Public education is also required to inform people of the Shore Plover presence on Motuora Island, and the birds vulnerability to disturbance, and the accidental introduction of rodents.

Assistance from various members of the OSNZ Auckland Branch and the Mid North Branch of the Forest and Bird Protection Society was essential in tracking down Shore Plovers on the mainland. It is important that mainland sightings of Shore Plovers are recorded, so a register of these sightings is being maintained by the Department of Conservation (contact Sylvia Watson on Motuora Island or Shaarina Boyde, DoC, Auckland office).

Alison Davis

VENERABLE OYSTERCATCHERS

In the 1970s, Allan Baker colour-banded a considerable number of Variable Oystercatchers at Waipu Spit in Northland. Because most of the survivors have lost some of their colour bands, we have recently been trying to re-trap them. This allows us to find out exactly who they are (and therefore how old they are) and to fit them with new colour bands so that they can be recognised by sight again.

In an earlier report (OSNZ News 74), we described how we re-trapped five birds in November 1994. Since then we have paid two more visits to Waipu, one in March 1995 and another just recently in February 1996.

In March last year, we caught two more of them. One had been banded as a chick in 1979 (a positive youngster at only 16 years old), the other as a sub-adult in 1971 (about 26 years old). Both were seen alive when we-checked this year, so are now 17 and 27 respectively.

In February this year we re-trapped a further three birds. All these were banded as adults in 1970 and are therefore a minimum of 29 years old.

We've caught ten of these oldies in total now, and there are at least two more at Waipu that we know of. We'll be going back until we think we've got all the survivors there. It is also possible that some of the birds Allan banded as chicks have dispersed from Waipu and may well be breeding elsewhere. If anyone sees any Variable Oystercatchers with old metal bands (with or without scraps of colour bands) in the Auckland - Northland area, we would definitely like to hear about it. Mangawhai Estuary, which is not far away, has a large population of VOCs and is an obvious place which we haven't checked thoroughly yet.

It is interesting to note that the oldest known oystercatchers of any species in the world are around 35 years old so there is a very good chance that some of these birds may be vying for a place in the record books John Dowding and Simon Chamberlin.

Any sightings as mentioned above can be sent to John Dowding at PO Box 36-559, Northcote, Auckland 1330, or to Adrian Riegen Ph/Fax 64(D)9-814-9741

COLOUR-BANDED BRISTLE-THIGHED CURLEWS - WHERE ARE THEY?

The Bristle-thighed Curlew has been the object of a long-term, multi-national effort to discern its status throughout the annual cycle. After a decade of study, it appears the species is relatively secure on its mostly pristine Alaskan breeding grounds. However, its status on the non-breeding grounds appears a bit more tenuous. In an effort to learn more about its non-breeding distribution we have colour-banded almost 600 adult birds, representing about 5% of the population.

To date we have records of about a dozen marked birds that have been seen away from their banding site, all representing birds captured at one specific site in Alaska and seen in the north-western Hawaiian Islands or visa versa. At another site in Alaska we have banded about 125 adults and 100 juvenile since 1990, but have had no reliable sightings away from Alaska, despite an annual return rate to the breeding grounds of over 85%.

Likewise, in the north-western Hawaiian Islands, the mostly northern part of the wintering range, we have banded over 400 birds. Relatively few remained to winter there and none has been seen farther south, yet many pass through again during migration. We know that some birds have lost some colour bands but, considering that the species is very long-lived (>20 years), the majority of banded birds must still be in the population. Where are they?

Anyone having an opportunity to visit archipelagoes of the south-central Pacific should keep their eyes open for marked Bristle-thighed Curlews. Especially opportune areas would include the Line, Phoenix, Cook, Tuamotu, and Marquesas Island groups.

Birds banded later in the study carry a single flag and three colour bands - all placed on the upper portions of the legs. Birds captured in the north-western Hawaiian Islands were not flagged, but instead carry two colour bands on the upper portions of each leg and a metal band on one of the upper legs.

A small number of birds were marked there with a single, light blue colour band. The metal band was placed on the lower leg of all birds captured in Alaska. Colours of bands and flags include: red, orange, yellow, mauve, black, white, light and dark blue and light and dark green. To this endless combination of colours add the fact that some bands have faded and yet others have been darkened by various natural agents.

If you happen to see a banded Bristle-thighed Curlew please note the placement of the bands and, without causing too much strain to your eyes, try to discern the colour combinations. It will be a challenge no matter what! Any sightings of marked birds or information about concentrations (more than a dozen individuals) will be greatly appreciated and acknowledged.

This information can be sent to Robert Gill, c/o National Biological Service, Alaska Science Center, 1011 E Tudor Road, Anchorage, Alaska 99503 or to the editor of this newsletter.

Robert Gill

Note: Robert Gill informs me that no Bar-tailed Godwits (BARGOS in Alaska) were banded in Alaska during 1995 but one banded in 1990 on the Seward Peninsula was seen for the second year running, on 2.12.95 at Miranda by Keith Woodley.

Adrian Riegen

SIGHTINGS WANTED OF PACIFIC ISLANDS WADERS

This is a timely point to ask for other Arctic migrant wader sightings from any Pacific island you might visit. Very little has been published on Arctic waders in the Pacific islands. Sightings of waders such as Bartailed Godwits would be very useful and I urge any of you visiting any of the Pacific islands to send your sighting to me. This way individual sightings can be put together to help in migration studies. All it takes is a quick phone call or fax to me. The information will be of more value, if not confined to individual note books. Any interesting sightings or observations will be published in this newsletter.

Contact Adrian Riegen Ph/Fax 64-(0)9-814-9741 - or write: Adrian Riegen, 231 Forest Hill Road, Waiatarua, Auckland 8.

SIGHTINGS ALREADY TO HAND – (and to get things started)

Fiji - Viti Levu - 30 Bar-tailed Godwits were seen on a beach near Nadi (at the end of the Nadi airport) on 19:2:96. Birds were in good condition, all showing breeding plumage. They were watched casually feeding. 9 Turnstones were with them, also in rich plumage.

New Caledonia - a suspected sighting of four Bristle-thighed Curlew at Vate Beach was made by a group of New Zealand bird-watchers in October 1985. When disturbed they flew off down the coast calling loudly a four syllable wee weeo - wee weeo. In later discussion with Beth Brown she considered we had seen Bristle-thighed Curlews:

Stuart Chambers

WAYWARD FEEDING BY A WRYBILL

On 22 January 1996 I stayed overnight at the Miranda Naturalists' Trust Centre and with the help of the manager, Keith Woodley, located the roosting flocks of knot, godwit, oystercatchers and Wrybill. 15 New Zealand Dotterel had gathered at Northern Taramaire Beach, which was also the site favoured by the Wrybills. Early the next morning while driving south to inspect the Limeworks area I was surprised to see a lone Wrybill running about on the tar-sealed road. The coast is about 200m from the water's edge at this point and several kilometres from Northern Taramaire Beach.

I stayed for some minutes to watch the behaviour of the bird. It was uninjured and was apparently searching for insects on the road surface. Several cars passed and each time the Wrybill flew in a semi-circle to alight back on the road and resume its search. This was at 07.30 and two hours before high tide. Returning at 10.30, I was interested to find the bird in the same place and behaving as before.

Opportunistic feeding by birds on road bugs is well known and is practiced with particular skill by the Common Myna in northern New Zealand. However it appears a remarkable and unlikely performance on the part of a shorebird

Michael Taylor

BLACK-FRONTED DOTTEREL BREEDING NEAR ROTORUA

The Waimangu Valley, Rotorua, hardly seems the spot to get excited about waders, though on 4 April 1996 it proved to be just that, with the discovery of at least three Black-fronted Dotterel. We stumbled upon these birds on the Marble Terrace, an orangey brown algae covered area formed by the over flow of a strong bubbling hot pool near the bottom of the thermal valley some distance from the shores of Lake Rotomahana.

The ability of these birds to camouflage themselves was just brilliant. With backs turned they were easily lost in their surrounds as they roamed the algae covered terrain.

The area covered about 1000 square metres with small plants scattered in the middle of and around its fringes. We soon discovered from our bus driver guide on our return ride to the valley entrance, that these birds have been there for at least three years. They had successfully raised chicks in the previous year and up to eight birds had been present at once. They preferred to use two sites for feeding, the area where we discovered them and a similar site at the Warbrick Terraces' about 50m further down the road. It seems that the shores of the lake when it is at low levels, may also provide suitable habitat at times.

The arrival of Black-fronted Dotterel in New Zealand dates back to a record of Braithwaite and Sorrel who discovered a single bird on the Ahuriri Lagoon, Napier on 9 August 1954. Other sightings followed during the winter of 1955 followed by the first South Island sighting in North Canterbury in April 1956. The next significant find was back in Hawke's Bay when a flock of three built up to five in the winter of 1958 at Lake Hurimoana. It then took three years before this species was recorded breeding in New Zealand for the first time.

A total of 13 adults and 9 juveniles were discovered on the Tutaekuri and Ngaruroro Rivers that year (1961), which was followed by a thorough search of the Hawke's Bay river beds in October 1962, when 109 birds were located. Colonisation and breeding of the species since then has taken a strong southerly trend. Wairarapa, South Canterbury, Central Otago and Southland have been the main benefactors though stray birds have ventured into northern regions of Northland, Auckland, Firth of Thames, Waikato and the Bay of Plenty. These areas have no records of any breeding.

Matata in the Bay of Plenty has been host of up to four birds in recent years, and at the nearby Tarawera River mouth a maximum of 11 were recorded in July 1992. The source of the river is from Lake Tarawera

which is adjacent to Lake Rotomahana. The discovery of the Waimangu birds is beginning to tit the pattern of past colonisations throughout the country. At first coastal records appear on an infrequent and then regular basis. This is then followed by the discovery of breeding activity in the area. It would seem from the number of birds over-wintering along the Bay of Plenty coast, that more than the odd pair may be active in the area. The river systems of the Tarawera and Rangitaiki could also be home to the continuing spread of the Black-fronted Dotterel.

Perhaps a survey of the Tarawera and Rangitaiki Rivers, Rotorua Lakes and other potential thermal sites may prove that this one isolated site/record is only part of an advance north as they seek out more suitable breeding habitat.

Note: The first recordings of this species in the Rotorua area was three birds in September 1974 on the Sulphur Flats by the Travel Lodge, on the shores of Lake Rotorua (A. Palliser).

UPDATE - Len Rosoman, Parks Manager for the Waimangu Volcanic Thermal Valley writes, "First noticed in 1992 on the Warbrick Terraces, two birds were feeding on insects which breed on the warm waters. In 1993 eight birds were on the same terraces. 1994-95 a pair with two chicks was seen on the Marbled Terrace. 1996 a pair hatched and raised a chick in the same area".

Robin Owens of Rotorua informs me of seeing at least six birds on the Marbled Terrace in early March of which two were less marked, presumed juveniles.

Tony Habraken



Black-fronted Dotterel on nest

Photo: Jim Hague

PAVEL TOMKOVICH'S MEMORIES OF NEW ZEALAND

Almost always our expectations do not coincide with what we find when visiting a new site. This was certainly the case with my visit to New Zealand in general, and to Miranda in particular. Even reading the Miranda Naturalists' Trust newsletters had not helped me imagine the area where Siberian waders spend the non-breeding season. Not a rather empty desert like beach was found, but a beautiful area with the shell banks of the Firth of Thames, with extensive mudflats, mangroves, marshes and neighbouring pastures surrounded by mountains, have given me an impression of paradise.

I appreciated very much the choice of the place for the Miranda Naturalists' Trust Centre, and it was easy to understand waders coming in larger numbers to such a lovely place, with its rich feeding areas. Maybe this is the reason that much higher densities are found in the Firth of Thames, compared to the Kaipara Harbour, for example.

It was a great pleasure to find out that the well being of Siberian and native waders was of concern and under the control of many enthusiasts in New Zealand. Developing public awareness about conservation of wetlands, important for migrating waders, is an extremely important task for the Miranda Naturalists' Trust. The role of the Trust in developing this awareness is difficult to over estimate.

It was extremely interesting and useful for me to learn about habitats, patterns of bird distribution, flocking and roosting behaviour of waders, as well as a day of cannon-netting with the NZWSG.

It was good to know that the Black Robin is not the only recovering species in the country, but there are many other achievements. During my visit I was able to see the impressive results of studies and regulation of predator numbers in Mapara Forest and on Tiri Tiri Matangi Island. Really, it is true, that it is better to see something once, than to hear or read about it many times.

My coming to New Zealand was like a pleasant dream in the northern dark snowy winter, For me as a person devoted to wader studies, thousands of waders looking in good condition ready to go northwards, was the most pleasant view. Formerly I could not even dream of seeing such an unusual wader as the Wrybill. Seeing flocks of them became a reality and I was surprised with the tameness of these birds, who allowed me to approach to within just a few metres to take photos. Such behaviour is rather common for flocking birds.

I am carrying home a lot of impressions and some photos. However I feel the most important result of my visit to New Zealand is making a lot of new friends in this part of the world, and I am most grateful to the Miranda Naturalists' Trust for making my visit possible.

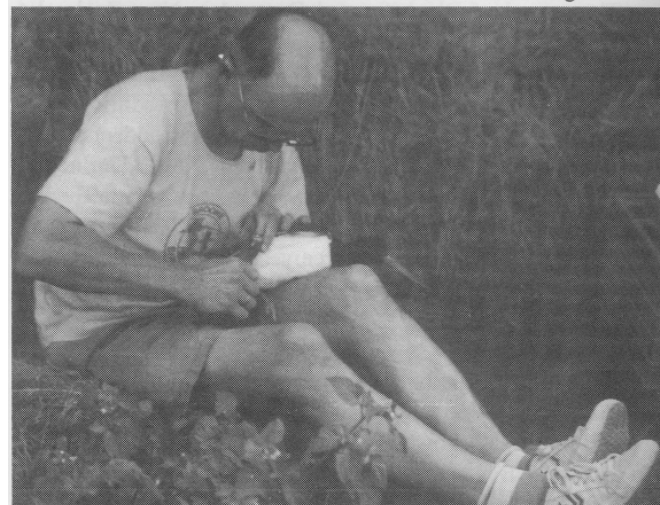
Pavel Tomkovich

15.03.96, Flight, Mid Tasman, Auckland – Sydney



*Pavel with Janet Owens, Department of
Conservation, at Miranda*

Photo: Adrian Riegen



*Pavel banding a South Island Pied Oystercatcher at
Jordans*

Photo: Adrian Riegen

Any articles for this publication or any bird sightings of banded or flagged birds should go to - Adrian Riegen, 231 Forest Hill Road, Waiatarua, Auckland 8. Phone (09) 814 9741