

Pukorokoro Miranda News

Journal of the Pukorokoro Miranda Naturalists' Trust

February 2015 Issue 95

Song of summer

Our Skylarks' ancestors may have come from England but they sing with a Kiwi accent

Marking the Year of the Godwit and our 40th birthday

Knots escape the net again



Trust strengthens ties with China

The good relationship between the tiny Pukorokoro Miranda Naturalists' Trust and the global giant that is China was further cemented during the visit to New Zealand late last year of Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Council member Estella Lee, who is the trust's liaison person on Chinese matters, was one of a select group invited to meet the powerful Chinese leader in Auckland.

The trust had hoped to present the president with a special copy of its report on 10 years of bird surveys at Yalu Jiang but under the protocol laid down for her meeting that was not possible. As Estella explained, 'I had a chance to meet him and had a group photo, but was not allowed to talk or present anything, not even a name card.'

However, a few days later Estella, chair Gillian Vaughan, deputy chair Adrian Riegen and manager Keith Woodley were able to hand the report to China's Deputy Consul in Auckland, Song Chenmao, to pass on to President Xi, plus a second copy for the consulate.

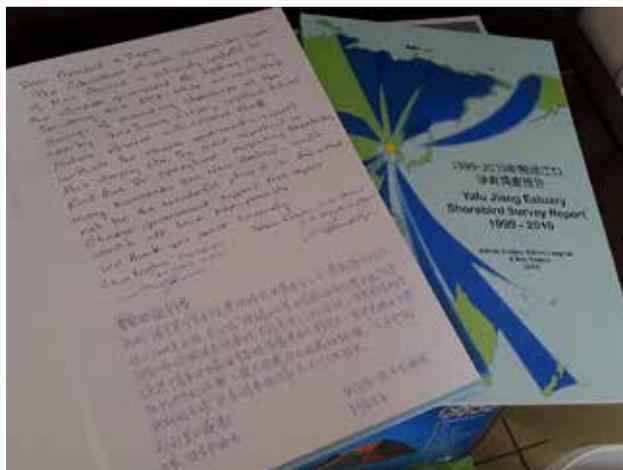
Estella said Madam Song, who has only recently arrived in New Zealand, was 'very touched by the godwit story and told us she will read the report. We invited her to come and visit Miranda.'

The copy of the report for the president is inscribed with a message in English and Chinese thanking the Chinese Government for its help. 'Without the Chinese Government's support this staging site, the the most important in East Asia for springtime migrating birds, [including] many thousands from New Zealand, would not be the wonderful place it is. And without Chinese Government support this report would not have been possible.'

China visit

Gillian was also able to follow up the connection with a visit to China as an observer at a series of bilateral talks on migratory birds between China, Australia, South Korea and Japan. (Her detailed report is on page 9)

Part of the brief for Gillian and Department of Conservation representative Bruce McKinlay was to see



BIRDING BONDS (clockwise from top): Trust chair Gillian Vaughan makes a presentation to China's Vice Consul in Auckland, Song Chenmao; Chinese President Xi Jinping; the report and message, in Mandarin and English, sent to President Xi. Photos / Estella Lee

how the bilateral arrangements work and to consider whether New Zealand should enter into a similar agreement with China.

The two also had talks with representatives of the Chinese government about potential ways of co-operating.

Gillian says DOC will be looking for ways to progress the various options over the next year.

Yalu Jiang

While in China Gillian also took the opportunity to re-visit Yalu Jiang and was delighted at the progress she found.

In particular, a section of the Yalu Jiang National Nature Reserve is now closed off and under the control of the

reserve, allowing the birds to enjoy much safer roosting.

Bohai Bay

A call by Adrian Riegen for the New Zealand Government to take a lead in efforts to protect the Red Knot stopover site at Bohai Bay in China, published in the November issue of *Pukorokoro Miranda News*, has received considerable support.

Adrian suggested that if New Zealand was able to find around \$1 million to build an education and visitor centre at Bohai Bay it might be the catalyst needed to have the mudflats and salt ponds turned into a nature reserve.

An approach to the new Minister of Conservation, Maggie Barry, to

discuss the idea has so far produced no response.

Mysterious bubbling

A mysterious spring (at right) has been discovered in the inter-tidal area about 50m north of the old hide.

Ray and Ann Buckmaster saw the water bubbling up forcefully and wondered what it was. 'It would be nice to think that it was a new thermal spring,' said Ray. 'However, it is more likely to be a buried drainage system from the Stilt Ponds.' Ray was sufficiently intrigued to return a few days later to have another look when 'the upwelling was much smaller and in three adjacent locations.'

Beware the fennel

As well as doing a great job as summer guide, Charmaine Stanley has also given the trust a bonus in the form of her partner Sean Nielsen. Among other things, Sean has done a huge amount of work in the Centre garden. Unfortunately in the process he discovered that he is allergic to fennel which caused him to break out in blisters.

North Korea

PMNT has received a grant of \$10,230 from the East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership towards the cost of sending a team to North Korea in May.

The visit will be the first under the agreement signed last year with the Nature Conservation Union of Korea for the trust to develop a multi-year programme of shorebird surveys.

Unfortunately, while the North Koreans are eager to learn more about their potentially vital stopover sites for migratory birds, the country is too poor to help with the costs involved.

The EAAFP grant will cover a significant part of the cost for this year's visit but there is still likely to be a shortfall. Manager Keith Woodley said, 'We're waiting to hear from the Koreans just how much our visit will cost but the trust will probably have to pick up some of the cost.'

Bittern

The trust is hoping to encourage more bitterns to settle in Pukorokoro. Plans are at an early stage but could see recording equipment used to see how many bitterns there are in the pond area, where at least one clutch is known to have been successfully fledged, followed by work to improve the habitat for the birds. 



What's on at the Shorebird Centre

As well as the usual programme of activities, this year there will also be several special events to mark the Pukorokoro Miranda Naturalists' Trust's 40th birthday.

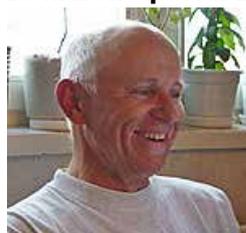
These include a birthday luncheon on 21 February, plus a series of addresses, in Auckland and at the Centre, by international experts on migratory birds.

The Auckland addresses will be held at the University of Auckland's Tamaki Campus. The first, by Pavel Tomkovich, will be on 18 March. Dates for the other Auckland addresses have yet to be finalised but will probably be on the Wednesday following the speakers' appearances at the Centre. Visit the trust's web page for further details.

21 February, 40th Birthday Celebration Luncheon

Speakers will be Miranda folk with stories about the early days. Cost is \$30 per person. Bookings essential as places will be limited. Contact the Shorebird Centre early.

15 March Special Birthday Speaker



10am Pavel Tomkovich on 'Waders of Siberia Revisited'. Catch up on 15 years of wader work in Siberia since Pavel was last here. High tide at 2.40pm so birdwatching after lunch

18 March, Auckland event

7.30pm Pavel Tomkovich speaks at the University of Auckland's Tamaki Campus.

24 May, Annual General Meeting

10am Have your say on the future of the Trust. Guest speaker to be announced. Birdwatching afterwards.

21 June, OSNZ Firth of Thames, Wader Census

All Welcome. Phone the Centre for further details.

8 August Winter Potluck Dinner

Working Bee 9am-1pm. High tide at 1.45pm so take a break for birdwatching. 6pm Dinner. Guest speakers to be announced.

4 October Special Birthday Speaker

10am Scott Weidensaul American Naturalist and Writer of books on migration. Birdwatching afterwards.

15 November OSNZ Firth of Thames Wader Census

Contact the Centre for details.

22 November Special Birthday Speaker

11am Theunis Piersma, Dutch wader biologist, returns to NZ after 10 years. Birdwatching afterwards.

SPECIAL GUESTS:
A trio of Curlew Sandpipers at Miranda. Photo / Ian Southey



From the manager

A great line-up of Arctic visitors

An amazing line-up of tundra breeding-species turned out for the trust's latest Wader ID Course, underlining the remarkable array of birds which have visited Miranda this summer, writes **Keith Woodley**

Just two or three years ago finding three Curlew Sandpipers in the first scope scan would have been of immense interest.

From being regularly present up until the late 1990s, they then suddenly dropped off the Miranda blackboard, and for most of the 2000s remained absent. This was a reflection of their overall status within the flyway, where a steep decline in numbers indicated a population in deep trouble.

But recently two or three had been recorded and their presence, on a Sunday morning session during the Wader ID course in late November, was most welcome for our purposes.

A second scan found seven birds foraging on the mud between the two hides. A more comprehensive scan of the area inside the shell spit eventually raised that number to 12 – an astonishing number.

So how is this species doing overall? It really depends on where in the world you are looking at them. Their global status according to the IUCN is Least Concern, due to their wide distribution and very large and apparently increasing worldwide population. Yet the population in the East Asian-Australasian Flyway appears to be declining sufficiently to qualify for Endangered

status at regional level.

However, evidence suggests there may be an exchange of birds from other (non-declining) populations, and so a downgraded regional status of Vulnerable has been recommended. But wherever the Miranda birds have come from, it was certainly pleasing to see this minor irruption.

But the Miranda Curlew Sandpipers were just part of an impressive array of tundra-breeding species lining up to test the skills of the Wader ID

participants. Indeed, it was one of the most diverse to be present at Miranda for many years.

In the bay in front of the hides four Red-necked Stints foraged with the Curlew Sandpipers, Red Knots and godwits and a few Pied Stilts.

Among the main flock of roosting Bar-tailed Godwits was a solitary Black-tailed Godwit in almost full breeding plumage. It may have been totally out of sync with its normal annual cycle, but it proved admirable

HIGHLIGHT:

It's called the Common Greenshank but these days it is a most uncommon visitor. Photo / Phil Battley



as a specimen for comparison with the bar-tails.

Along the edge of the shell bank some Turnstones went about their business, while a few Wrybill and Banded Dotterel rounded out the roll call of the smaller waders.

Spread out among the other birds, in their distinctive alert posture, were several Pacific Golden Plovers, some of the 38 here this season. Capping it off in spectacular fashion was the Eastern Curlew that was featured in the last issue of *PMNT News*.

The proximity of the curlew to the busy stints was particularly illuminating; the world's largest wader beside one of the smallest.

On several occasions four or more species appeared in a single scope view so we were able to talk people through the various features for identifying them. It was like having a field guide plate in front of the scope.

But there was more to come, for over on the stilt ponds there were further ID lessons to be had. Among the ubiquitous stilts were the Marsh Sandpiper, several Sharp-tailed Sandpipers and three Pectoral Sandpipers. The latter too is an unusual number for Miranda.

But the undoubted highlight of the session was the Common Greenshank discovered by Gillian Vaughan.

This is a bird we are familiar with from other places, notably at Yalu Jiang where one or two birds seem to inhabit almost every fish pond along the reserve coastline. But it is an exceedingly infrequent visitor to Miranda and, as if to preserve this status, this bird did not linger.

A few hours later Janie Vaughan saw it once more and heard it calling, and that was the last confirmed sighting to date. Nevertheless, its brief presence was a marvelous bonus to everyone present on the day it decided to pay a visit.

It also gave those on the course some practical experience in how to prepare an Unusual Bird Sighting report for Birds NZ.

With 15 keen observers combining their observations for the report, hopefully the Records Appraisal Committee will be satisfied that it was indeed a Common Greenshank. 



NEW ARRIVALS: Black-billed Gulls and chicks out looking for food. Photo / Charmaine Stanley

From the shellbank

Chicks popping out all over

Summer guide **Charmaine Stanley** reports on a highly successful breeding season for the birds on Pukorokoro's shellbank and ponds

I've been at Pukorokoro Miranda for 12 weeks now and there's been a lot going on. The birds appear to have had a fabulous breeding season so far.

The White-faced Herons and Pied Stilts have a lot of juveniles in their flocks now, and it's funny to watch the sweet youngsters learning to forage and catch their food – coordination is still a bit lacking there.

The Black-billed Gulls have successfully fledged a large amount of chicks despite the stormy weather we had in early December. There are still a few of the late chicks who are heavily dependent on mum and dad for most of their food.

The White-fronted Tern chicks hatched around New Year's Day, and after a week of laying low they are now up and running around discovering the wonders of their home on the shellbank. I look forward to watching them grow and fledge just like the gulls.

Our beloved Eastern Curlew is still around, too, probing for mud crabs, fending off the sneaky gulls and often seen having a good long snooze.

Last of all we have our summer breeders coming back. The shellbank and mudflats are progressively filling up with more and more South Island

Pied Oystercatchers and Wrybills, making it a great time to come and see the birds.

Arctic Migrants

<i>Bar-tailed Godwit</i>	4800+
<i>Black-tailed Godwit</i>	2
<i>Ruddy Turnstone</i>	12
<i>Red Knot</i>	1000+
<i>Sharp-tailed Sandpiper</i>	6
<i>Marsh Sandpiper</i>	1
<i>Red-necked Stint</i>	4
<i>Pacific Golden Plover</i>	37
<i>Curlew Sandpiper</i>	5
<i>Pectoral Sandpiper</i>	3
<i>Eastern Curlew</i>	2
<i>Little Tern</i>	1
<i>White-winged black tern</i>	1

New Zealand Species

<i>Wrybill</i>	1300
<i>NZ Dotterel</i>	
<i>Banded Dotterel</i>	75
<i>SI Pied Oystercatcher</i>	5000+
<i>White-fronted Tern</i>	
<i>Black-billed Gull</i>	900
<i>Pied Stilt</i>	
<i>Royal Spoonbill</i>	15
<i>Caspian Tern</i>	
<i>Bittern</i>	



A big birthday celebration for the trust . . . and for our godwits

Plans to mark the 40th birthday of the Pukorokoro Miranda Naturalists' Trust by promoting 2015 as the Year of the Godwit are progressing well. Highlights include a birthday luncheon, addresses from international experts, poster and writing contests for children, a photography competition and a commemorative t-shirt.

The Shorebird Centre website now has a new banner (above), designed by Keith Woodley and Adrian Riegen, declaring it to be the Year of the Godwit.

Our Facebook page has been given fresh life by summer guide Charmaine Stanley, who has been regularly posting fresh photos of activity on the shellbank and ponds, and the number of followers is climbing steadily as a result. At the time of writing it was up to 665 (Stop Press: 684 and climbing). If you haven't taken a time to check us out on Facebook it's well worth doing because the page provides a fascinating picture of the ever-changing pattern of shorebird life on the Firth of Thames. There's a link on our website or you can find the page at www.facebook.com/MirandaShorebirdCentre.

School competition

The Year of the Godwit writing and poster competitions for schools is now underway.

Pupils in years 1-8 in some 200 local schools have been invited to design a poster or produce a piece of creative writing about the life of these amazing birds.

Winners in each of five age groups will win prizes of book vouchers at the Shorebird Centre shop and the most successful school will get a bonus prize of either a book voucher or a free class visit to Pukorokoro Miranda.

Posters (at right) promoting the competition have been sent out to schools in Thames-Coromandel, South Auckland and North Waikato

Pūkorokoro Miranda Naturalists' Trust 2015 Godwit Competition

**"Our Godwits are not able to speak for themselves.
Can you speak for them?"**

Can you look through their eyes and tell us about their world?

**Can you design a poster or write creatively to show
something about the life of these special birds?"**

2015 is the 40th Anniversary of PMNT. To celebrate we are going to highlight our special birds. Help us make 2015 "The Year of the Godwit".

We invite students from Year 1-8 to design a poster to celebrate the life of the Godwit.

You can use any medium to create your poster but it must be A3 size and all your own work and signed by your teacher.

We invite students from Year 9-13 to write creatively about some aspects of the life and world of the Godwit.

Up to 500 words, either poetry or prose. This must be your own work and signed by your teacher.

Works will be displayed
at the

Pūkorokoro Miranda Shorebird Centre



Bar-tailed Godwit

The microchip on this bird's leg tells us where it has been

We know but do you know?

Photo: Phil Battley

Prizes

There are 5 age groups in the competition.

The 1st prize in each group is a \$50 voucher from the PM Shorebird Centre Shop (10 points to the school).

The runner-up will receive a \$20 voucher (5 points to the school).

Every entry gains 1 point for their school.

The school with the highest points total can choose as a prize, either a free talk and shorebird guide for a class of up to 30 students at the PM Shorebird Centre or \$100 voucher.

but schools further afield are welcome to enter. They can get details of the competition from our Facebook and web pages.

Judge for the poster competition is Sandra Morris, who runs an art course each year at the Centre, and the creative writing judge is Nicola Daly, a lecturer in Education at the University of Waikato

Birthday gifts

You can already buy Year of the Godwit pens from the Shorebird Centre shop for \$2.50 each. And work is underway on the design of a special Year of the Godwit t-shirt. So keep your eyes peeled for when it appears.

Godwit facts

Immediate past chair of the trust, and current president of Birds NZ (aka OSNZ) David Lawrie is endeavouring to tweet a different interesting fact about godwits on every day of 2015.

One recent tweet, for example, recalls that Maori had a saying 'Kua kite te kohanga Kuaka?' or 'Who has seen the nest of the Kuaka?' because, of course, our godwits nest only in Alaska. Because of this godwits were birds of mystery believed to come from the ancient homeland of Hawaiki.

If you're not a Twitter afficianado just Google @miranda_trust and look for #yearofthegodwit. Or there's a link on the Centre's website.

Lecture series

One of the most important aspects of the birthday celebrations will be a lecture series by international experts to be held in both Auckland and Miranda.

Unfortunately plans for the Auckland talks to be held in conjunction with the Auckland Museum have fallen over. Instead the talks will be at the University of Auckland's Tamaki Campus.

The latest information about what's happening is in 'What's on at Miranda' on page 3 of this issue. Updates will be carried on the trust's website.

Photo competition

Over the years Miranda has inspired some wonderful photos so as part of the birthday programme the trust is holding a photo competition (see full details at right). It's open to all, including non-members, and the best entries will win books from the Shorebird Centre shop. 

Photo Competition

As part of the celebrations for the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Pukorokoro Miranda Naturalists' Trust we are running a photographic competition

There will be two sections:

Best Bar-tailed Godwit photo taken anywhere, carrying a prize of a \$100 book voucher from the Shorebird Centre shop



Photo / Phil Battley

Best Pukorokoro Miranda photo, carrying a prize of a \$100 book voucher from our shop. In addition, the Pukorokoro Miranda section will be divided into sub-sections for: **Fauna, Flora, Landscape and People**, with the best photo in each winning a \$50 book voucher.



Photo / Jim Eagles

Entrants will retain copyright over their entries but the trust will have the right to run photos in the magazine and (in a reduced size) on its Facebook page and website.

Entries can be sent to shorebird@farmside.co.nz (with 'photo competition' in the subject line) or delivered to the Shorebird Centre on a memory stick or a CD. Initially please keep file sizes down to less than 100kb. Finalists may be asked to provide larger files. Be sure to provide full contact details with the photos.

Entries will close at 5pm on Sunday May 31

The competition will be judged by Bruce Shanks who for several years has run the Bird Photography courses at the Shorebird Centre.

The best photos will be on display at the Pot Luck Dinner on 8 August. Winners will be announced in the August issue of *Pukorokoro Miranda News* and on the trust's web and Facebook pages.



From the chair

40 years of work brings results

The Pukorokoro Miranda Naturalists' Trust's 40th birthday festivities are an occasion to celebrate how much has been achieved on behalf of the environment over that time, writes **Gillian Vaughan**

40 years. When the trust was 30 years old I wrote in my 'From the editor' that at 21 you feel grown up but at 30 you are actually starting to mature. The work the trust is doing now I think in many ways reflects that statement.

We have continued much of the work that we had started 10 years ago, and are really seeing the benefits of the long term approach that we are able to take.

We are able to take the approach we have because of the way the trust was set up, flexible enough that we can turn our hand to what is needed, while at the same time staying focussed on the basics of what we are doing.

The culture of the trust, and of the trust council, comes from the early days of the trust. The can-do attitude that led to the setting up of the trust, the eventual building of the centre, employing a full time staff member is reflected in our work today in different ways – like building relationships in China and North Korea.

It is therefore fitting that we celebrate who we are, the achievements gained, and the way forward. We've chosen to do this by going back to the beginning.

What brought us together originally was the birdlife of Miranda. By choosing the theme Year of the Godwit we acknowledge that origin. By making the first event of our year a member's lunch we celebrate those people who have built the trust, carried us on and will carry us forward.

I write this sitting at the Miranda Field Course, waiting for the Wader ID section where I'll be helping. Keith Woodley and I recently went through a small pile of previous years coursebooks, looking at who has been involved, both as participants and tutors, and talking about where some of those people are now. It was a microcosm of the Miranda experience.

Some people never really leave,



LEADERSHIP: In its 40 years the trust has been lucky to have some fine leaders including (clockwise, from top left) Gillian Vaughan, David Lawrie, Stuart Chambers and John Gale.

some stay a while and move on, many become highly involved in volunteer and conservation work elsewhere. The trust is about the natural environment, it's about the birds. But first and foremost it's about the people, those without whom none of the work

going to have some great events, and we'll be attempting to have most of our overseas speakers giving talks away from Miranda as well as while they are at the Shorebird Centre, so keep an eye out for updates.

And if you aren't around physically then follow @miranda_trust on twitter and see if David Lawrie can post something about godwits every day #yearofthegodwit. A fact a day may not sound like

much but when you have to come up with 365 it might be a challenge.

Ann Buckmaster is running our Facebook page, and it will be worth keeping up with that so you know what is going on.

But, best of all, come down to the Shorebird Centre for at least one of our events and join in the celebrations . . . there's plenty to celebrate. 🐦

'What brought us together originally was the birdlife of Miranda. By choosing the theme Year of the Godwit we acknowledge that origin. By making the first event of our year a member's lunch we celebrate those people who have built the trust, carried us on and will carry us forward.'

here, or elsewhere in the world, would happen.

Join us for our celebratory lunch, and if you are unable to make it and have a particular memory you'd like to share please feel free to send it to me and I'll arrange for it to be presented on the day. (email is always easiest – gillianv@actrix.co.nz)

It's going to be quite a year. We're



BUILDING BRIDGES, (at left): Gillian Vaughan follows discussion via the translation service; (below) doing an interview for Dandong TV.

Photos / Bruce McKinlay

Another step forward

Gillian Vaughan reports on an encouraging trip to China

In November Bruce McKinlay of the Department of Conservation and I went as observers to the series of bilateral meetings on migratory bird protection held biennially between China, Australia, South Korea and Japan.

These are an important set of meetings, as China is not a member of the Convention on Migratory species, and therefore bilateral arrangements are the only way that migratory bird protection can be approached at a government level.

New Zealand does not have a specific agreement on migratory bird protection with any of those countries, and one of the aims of the visit was to look at how those arrangements work, whether we should enter into one with China, and if so what would be the appropriate framework: treaty, memorandum of understanding or through environmental clauses in existing agreements?

In New Zealand DOC is clear that with regard to migratory birds our interests are largely confined to shorebirds, and that only three species, godwit, knot and turnstone, occur in high enough numbers for our government to have a significant stake in discussions around their conservation. This is in stark contrast to the parties involved in the talks that we attended, who are dealing with hundreds of migratory species from passerines to gulls and ducks.



From a New Zealand perspective it became clear that the bilateral treaties such as those held between Australia and China are not necessarily the best model for us to follow. We were able to speak with representatives from the Chinese government around potential ways of co-operating and Bruce, as the DOC representative, will be looking for ways to take this forward.

In addition to attending the talks we were invited to attend the release of Crested Ibis in a nearby wetland, the first time this had been attempted in southern China since the species went through an earlier range contraction.

After leaving the bilateral talks we headed north to Dandong for a catch-up meeting at the Yalu Jiang National Nature Reserve. We met with the reserve staff and management and are hoping they will be able to visit us later in the year. We will also be sending a team up to the reserve in April to participate in a further survey, a festival and other profile-raising events.

I had not been back to the Reserve since 2010 and it was great to go back

and catch up with old friends. Most of the staff members are long term and I realised when seeing pictures of their children how long Miranda really has been involved here. It was neat to see the changes that are occurring in the reserve, with one section now largely closed off and under reserve control, thus allowing for more protected roosting and nesting areas for birds. Bruce and I visited this area and gave an interview for Dandong TV on the importance of the reserve and the amazing migration of shorebirds.

There were fewer birds than I had ever seen at Yalu Jiang, the southward migration being largely over. We did still see hundreds of curlews, as well as small numbers of Grey Plover and a smattering of smaller, distant birds which I suspect were Dunlin. There were also high numbers of ducks and geese on the mudflats.

It is hard to predict exactly what will come out of this visit but I think both Bruce and I came away feeling that it was a step forward in the conservation of migratory shorebirds 

Miranda banders' knotty problem



Banding convenor Adrian Riegen (at left) had good reason to raise his eyes to heaven when once again the gods of banding denied him the hoped-for netful of Red Knots to be flagged.

At least the reason for the lack of success was different this time. At other recent cannon-netting efforts the knots have simply refused to go into the netting area. This time they packed into the northern end of the net but, for some mysterious reason, the northernmost cannon failed to fire.

As a result the catch consisted of one knot which was lavished with attention, photographed extensively and flagged (at left, second from top), in the hope it will be spotted somewhere like Bohai Bay; 15 South Island Pied Oystercatchers, which were released unbanded; and 159 Bar-tailed Godwits, of which 130 had engraved flags fitted and all were banded.

Among the godwits were two which had been flagged in Victoria and eight banded at Miranda since 2008.

One bird was retrapped with a broken flag. Because it was well-worn, Adrian explained, the initial thought was 'it was an old plain flag. But it turns out to have been an engraved flag AXE which has not been recorded for four years. This is the first bird we have retrapped with a broken flag.'

The netting was done on the shellbank which meant sloshing through the mud to carry the gear over and boots full of water on the way back.

The site chosen was further down the shellbank than has been tried before so a couple of temporary hides were built out of hessian. 'Not ideal,' said Adrian, 'but we could not let the birds see the 25 people waiting to catch them so close by.'

The camouflage must have worked, because the birds assembled in the netting area well before high tide, but then the cannon failure spoiled what had looked like being a reasonable catch of knots which, as Adrian had told the team beforehand, was much-needed in order to get further information to back the case for their stopover sites on the Yellow Sea to be protected. 



BANDING
(above):
Hiding under
camouflage
nets; (at
left) racing
with boxes
to rescue the
catch.
Photos /
Jim Eagles,
Nancy Van
Nieuwenhove



BANDING (clockwise from top left): Comparing male and female bills; measuring a bill; banding a very relaxed godwit; Dick Veitch checks the moult; Adrian shows how to empty a flooded gumboot; Tony Habraken leads the way across the stream; Tony examines a wing which has just flown 11,000km from Alaska to the Firth of Thames.

Photos / Jim Eagles



The glorious sound of summer

Jim Eagles reports on some English immigrants whose glorious song adds extra magic to any summertime visit to Miranda.

One of the special joys of visiting Pukorokoro Miranda and wandering along the path to the hides is the chance to listen to the glorious singing of the many skylarks that live there.

These small streaky-brown birds are visually unspectacular and difficult to see but the beautiful melodies they produce, especially during the mating season in spring and early summer, are well worth pausing to listen to.

If you've never really heard a skylark in full flight then the wonderful NZ Birds Online website has several examples at: <http://nzbirdsonline.org.nz/species/eurasian-skyllark>

The Eurasian Skylark, *Alauda arvensis*, is naturally found across most of Europe and Asia and in the mountains of North Africa. Its glorious singing has made the bird a favourite of humans from ancient times.

British settlers who missed its sound began introducing it as early as 1864 so, although not a native species, it has lived here longer than most pakeha families. Maori call it kaireka as a tribute to its sweet singing.

A thousand skylarks were released initially and quickly spread across most of the country other than the forests and mountains. Actual numbers aren't known but, as NZ Birds Online puts it, 'they are certainly numerous'.

Skylarks like open country such as paddocks, dunes and tussock. They prefer areas that aren't too tidily grazed or mown so they can build their small, neat cup-nests under the shelter of overhanging clumps of grass or rushes.

Breeding season density is thought to range from around 22 birds per km² on Canterbury pastoral farms to 13 on dairy farms and possibly as low as 5 on Otago sheep and beef farms. We've never done a count at Miranda but on a summer day you get the impression that the population density is even greater than the national figures suggest.

Certainly visitors from Britain, where numbers have plummeted as a result of modern agricultural practices,



SOARING SINGING: Skylarks in action in flight (top) and on the ground (bottom).
Photos / Tony Whitehead

are amazed at how many skylarks they encounter while walking to the hides. Several have also commented that kiwi skylarks sing with a different accent to British ones.

Couples are monogamous – though DNA tests in Europe suggest that females do often mate with males other than their life partners – and produce 2-3 clutches of 3-5 brown-speckled greyish eggs a season. The female incubates the eggs alone but the males play their part by providing around half the food for the nestlings. Skylarks feed on seeds, from weeds,

pasture grasses and cereals, as well as bugs, spiders, flies and larvae.

It's during the breeding season, from August to January, that skylark performances reach their pinnacle. The males fly steeply up, above their territory, singing as they go, climbing as high as 100m above ground. Then they circle for several minutes, sometimes apparently for as long as an hour, before parachuting to the ground, wings and tails held out stiffly, singing all the while.

Their singing is variously described as 'ecstatic', 'vibrant', 'a liquid chirrup',

‘the very voice of spring’, ‘exalted’ and ‘soaring’.

Perhaps the greatest tribute is that the collective noun for the birds is ‘an exaltation of skylarks.’

Over a century ago John Gould wrote in his magisterial *Birds of Great Britain*: ‘It cannot be expected that anything I may attempt to say respecting the history of a bird so well known as the skylark will be imbued with novelty. From the days of Chaucer and Spenser nearly every poet of eminence has alluded to its charming song, and every writer, although unimbued with poetic feeling, has very correctly described its habits, disposition and economy. . . For me to rhapsodize on the aerial song and other pleasing traits of the skylark would be absurd, since poems and verses on this head are almost innumerable, many of them written with much feeling, and exquisite beauty of expression.’

Of the countless poems about this special bird I personally prefer *To a Skylark* by Percy Bysshe Shelley, the opening lines of which are:

Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!
Bird thou never wert,
That from Heaven, or near it,
Pourest thy full heart
In profuse strains of
unpremeditated art.
Higher still and higher
From the earth thou springest
Like a cloud of fire;
The blue deep thou wingest,
And singing still dost soar, and
soaring ever singest.

You can read the whole of that poem at: www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174413

Another poem, George Meredith’s *The Lark Ascending*, in turn inspired what is probably my all-time favourite piece of music, Ralph Vaughan Williams’ tone-poem of the same name.

If you’d like to compare the actual song of the skylark to the orchestral version you can hear it at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWwBh0dgi4

It’s a magnificent and moving performance . . . but not as glorious as the sound you can hear above the meadows at Miranda on a summer’s day. 



HAPPY FAMILIES: A skylark nest (above) and hungry chicks being fed (below). Photos / Peter Morrison, Department of Conservation.



IN TUNE: A pair of skylarks at Miranda.

Photo / Tony Whitehead



GREEN MISTLETOE (from left): A bush parasitised by Pirita; the swollen stem of the host is where the haustorium, or link, is located. Photos / Ray Buckmaster

Watch out for our local mistletoe

As you wander along the coastal plain at Miranda, if you look carefully you'll find a couple of notable parasitic plants, writes **Ray Buckmaster**, in the second article in his series on the area's flora.

Probably the most famous plant parasite is mistletoe. Seen as a message from the gods, it was cut from a living oak by pagan priests using a golden sickle. This had to occur on the sixth day of the first new moon after the winter solstice, a time which coincides roughly with Christmas-New Year.

The pagan priests were Druids and the plant, the European Mistletoe, was hung in entrance ways to protect a house and its occupants from evil. This is still practiced widely in Europe around New Year although the pagan connection means that it is seldom used in church decoration.

New Zealand has eight mistletoe species, all but one of them endemic, but they are of a different flowering plant family and there is no mythology attached to it. Instead, the fruits, which are very sweet, were eaten by Maori.

Pukorokoro-Miranda is one of the few areas in the Auckland region where one species of this family can be found. The family is *Loranthaceae* and the species is known as Pirita or Green Mistletoe (*Ileostylus micranthus*).

Technically it is said to be an obligate hemi-parasite. It is obliged to live parasitically because it can only exist fixed on a host plant. A union, known as a haustorium, forms



EXOTIC PARASITE: Broomrape seeds probably sneaked into New Zealand with those of pasture plants. Photo / Ray Buckmaster

between the living wood of its host and the mistletoe's own tissues, allowing water and minerals to flow across to it. However, the plant is not totally dependent on its host as it is green and

can photosynthesise, thus needing no food from its host plant, so it is only a half parasite.

Pirita flowers from September to December and the fruits ripen into

April. The flowers are not showy and attract only bees, flies and moths as pollinators. Birds do enjoy the fruit, some being swallowed whole by larger birds, the seeds passing through or being regurgitated. Birds also spread Pirita via the sticky coating on the seeds which can attach first to a bird's beak and then to a branch of a new host plant.

Once it is attached in this way it might take a year for the seed to develop the physical link with the potential host. Two hundred and six host species that are parasitized by Pirita have been identified. Two species, *Coprosma propinqua* and Salt-marsh Ribbonwood (*Plagianthus divaricatus*), are the main hosts in the Miranda area.

Pohuehue (*Muehlenbeckia australis*) and Macrocarpa have also been found to be parasitized. In the Waitakere Ranges, Hall's Totara is the favoured host.

Pirita is not hard to find at Miranda. A few years ago the Department of Conservation planted 900 host plants in strips on the seaward side of the road to the north of the Shorebird Centre.

The Centre grounds contain many suitable host plants but, sadly, most Pirita there have died. However, the recent discovery of a small Green Mistletoe suggests that it should be possible to re-establish the plant there. A task for the future perhaps.

A more common exotic parasite is Broomrape (*Orobancha minor*) which is an obligate parasite of herbaceous rather than woody plants. Its flower heads can be found around the Centre grounds and on the walk to the hides. It has no chlorophyll at all so cannot photosynthesise. The flowers have a dull pink, sometimes yellow, pigmentation and flowering is in late Spring.

The roots of the Broomrape form haustoria, or links, primarily with the roots of Clover plants and also Wild Carrot allowing it to draw off nutrients. In Europe it also parasitizes the Broom plant, hence its common name.

Broomrape has very fine seeds and probably arrived in New Zealand as a contaminant of Clover or Rye Grass seed. 



REDISCOVERED: Flowering shoots of Glasswort with pockets formed by gall mites. Photo / Nicholas Martin, Plant & Food

Scientist rediscovers lost insect at Miranda

Nicholas Martin, an entomologist at the Crown Research Institute, Plant & Food Research, and secretary of the Auckland Branch of the Entomological Society of NZ, reports on his rediscovery of the Glasswort Gall Mite.

In the November 2014 issue of *Pukorokoro Miranda News*, there was an article about Glasswort (*Sarcocornia quinqueflorae*). It reminded me that during the Bioblitz held at the Shorebird Centre in February 2013 I found the Glasswort Gall Mite (*Aceria rubifaciens*).

The mite induces distinctive pocket galls in the stems of glasswort and had not been seen since its original discovery in the Waitemata Harbour in March 1948.

The exciting find of galls on glasswort was made in part of the estuary about 5km north of the Shorebird Centre. Since then, I have

also found galls on plants at Kaiaua and Omana Regional Park, Maraetai.

The gall is initiated when mites feed on young stems. Mite feeding results in the plant cells multiplying to produce thick pink lips that surround a cavity in which the mites live and breed.

Within the Bioblitz area I also found adults and nymphs of the Glasswort Mirid (*Coridromius variegatus*). This distinctive small insect was feeding on the flowers and seeds of glasswort. Details of other invertebrates associated with glasswort can be found at plantSynZ web site link: <http://plant-synz.landcareresearch.co.nz/SearchForm.aspx> 



GALL MITES (from left): Pocket gall on Glasswort with Glasswort Gall Mites on the lip of the gall; the white arrow points to a mite; Glasswort Gall Mites in a pocket gall. Photos / Tim Holmes, Plant & Food Research.



ROMANTIC: The remains of the massive Haapsalu Castle hint at Estonia's long and often turbulent history.

Photo / Ivar Leidsen

Birding in an olde worlde atmosphere

Keith Woodley reports on the annual conference of the International Wader Study Group in Estonia where the amazing migratory flight of the Bar-tailed Godwits and the work PMNT is doing on their behalf at Yalu Jiang attracted much attention.

It was an intriguing schedule: a conference in Darwin followed six days later by one in Haapsalu, Estonia.

The Australasian Shorebird Conference is held every two years, and has been a regular entry on my calendar since the 1990s. But getting to one of the annual conferences of the International Wader Study Group has long been on my to-do list.

By late 2013 the venue for the 2014 event had narrowed down to two candidates: Estonia or Iceland, and I resolved I would attend wherever it was. At the end of September I therefore embarked on a marathon transit from Darwin via Singapore and Copenhagen to Helsinki, followed by a three-hour ferry crossing to Tallinn.

As with so many places across northern Europe there is a fairy tale quality about Tallinn, with its castles and spires, city walls and cobbled streets. Estonia is a country that has long been at the crossroads of history and, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a fiercely independent one.

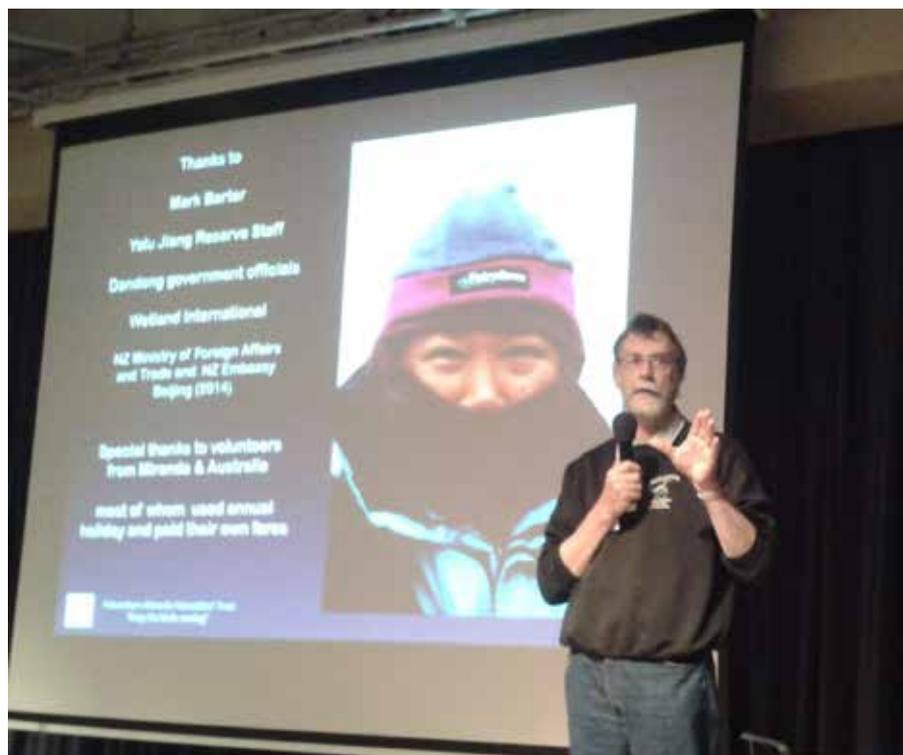
The two-hour bus trip west to Haapsalu, where the conference was held, revealed a flat land of pasture and villages, and woodland only just beginning to register autumn. Haapsalu is a coastal resort town at the centre of which there sits the remains of an enormous ecclesiastical castle.

With the overwhelming majority of conference participants coming from

all parts of Europe, as well as the UK and Ireland, Iceland and Russia, it was unsurprising to find an emphasis on palearctic shorebirds evident in the research findings presented. But of course shorebirds are not noted for geographical confinement, and nor are those studying and working with them. Hence there were also representatives from Ghana, Canada,

and USA (Alaska in particular).

One theme of the conference was climate change, and the increasing evidence of effects on shorebirds. For instance, during a 17-year period Sanderlings have advanced their hatching date by only 2-3 days per decade, but their arthropod prey has advanced by up to 30 days per decade. This mismatch results in later-hatching



GODWITS IN THE SPOTLIGHT: A heavily disguised Estella Lee makes a guest appearance during Keith Woodley's presentation on Yalu Jiang.

Photo / Kaira Puur

chicks showing poorer growth and survival. With Sanderling limited by environmental constraints during migration in their ability to advance breeding, it is likely individuals wintering in tropical rather than temperate areas are especially affected.

For Black-tailed Godwits breeding in continental Europe the ability to adapt to climate change is, in theory, a lot stronger. However, several presentations demonstrated that farming practices, such as increasing monoculture replacing traditional meadows, are preventing this from happening.

There is growing awareness and concern in Europe about the status of shorebird populations in the East Asian-Australasia Flyway. Two species in particular have, for very different reasons, a high profile globally.

One is the Bar-tailed Godwit, not the least due to its massive migration flights, the other the critically endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper and the extraordinary efforts to bring it back from the brink of extinction. The involvement of Birdlife International and RSPB in the latter project has led to an increased focus in general on East Asia and its declining populations of waterbirds.

There was, therefore, a lot of interest in our presentation about PMNT's work at Yalu Jiang, as well as our engagement with North Korea.

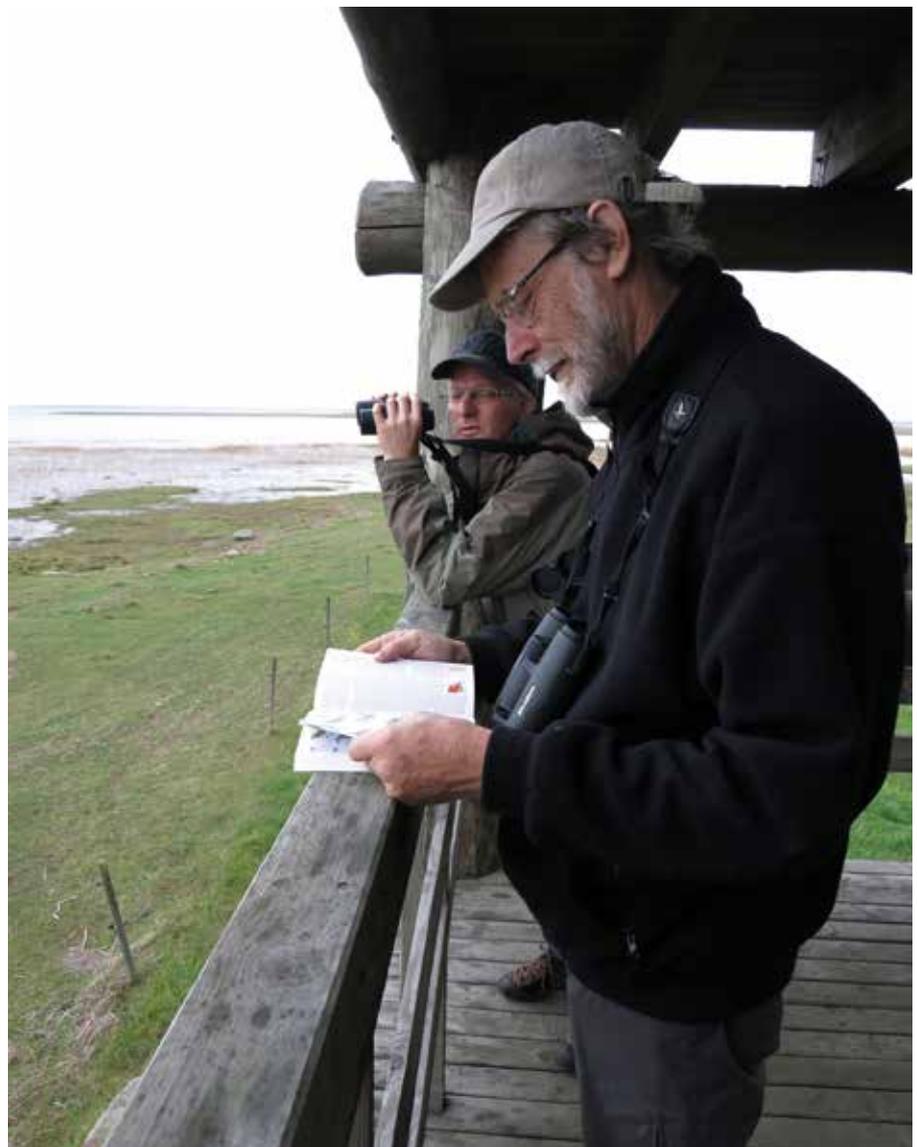
Among the other highlights presented was one rather remarkable story. The three Pectoral Sandpipers present at Miranda this summer represent a species capable of some astonishing behaviour.

It is one of the few lek species among shorebirds, in which males take up stances and postures to display in an area known as a court or arena. Such places are, according to a dictionary of ornithology, 'a rendezvous resorted to by females in condition for sexual stimulation and coition.' But it would seem for some male Pectoral Sandpipers, one or two such places are not quite enough.

After having arrived at Barrow in northern Alaska, a known breeding location, individual males sampled up to 14 other potential breeding areas within a three-week period in June, travelling a total distance within the



A WORLDWIDE AUDIENCE (above): The International Wader Study Group Conference in Haapsalu; (below) Keith Woodley birding in Estonia with Jesse Conklin. Photos Kaira Puur, Dan Ruthrauf.



Arctic of up to 15,000 km. Individual males thereby covered a considerable part of the entire species' breeding range within a single season, *after* having migrated from the southern hemisphere. 

GODWIT TIMES

Hi Guys

Us Arctic shorebirds have been enjoying some great weather during our summer visit to the Hauraki Gulf. But the wind and rain are bound to return sometime. So here's a couple of Hauraki Gulf puzzles for you to do when it turns nasty and you're stuck inside.

Your friend
Godfrey Godwit

OCEAN SUDOKU PUZZLES
Fill in each grid using the 4 ocean symbols. Only one of each symbol can be used per row, and one of each per column. Similarly, in each small 2 x 2 square, within the large squares, each symbol is used once.

The puzzles are arranged in a 2x2 grid. Each puzzle is a 4x4 grid. The symbols used are a purple starfish, a red sun with a face, an orange fish, and a blue shark. The puzzles are partially filled with these symbols.

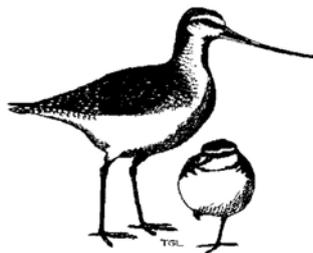
Follow the lines to help the common sea snail (also known as cat's eyes or kanohi pūpū) to find a tasty meal. Start from the purple dots.

The maze starts at a purple dot on the left. The snail is in the center. There are four paths leading to different items:

- Top:** A shark. Text: "I definitely can't eat this shark!"
- Left:** A green whelk. Text: "Argh, no! This whelk is a predator & could eat me."
- Right:** A pink starfish. Text: "Nope - the cushion starfish isn't my breakfast."
- Bottom:** A patch of green algae on a rock. Text: "Yum! Green algae is my favourite!"

There is also a piece of green kelp on the left with the text: "This kelp is too tough for me."

PUKOROKORO MIRANDA NATURALISTS' TRUST



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Pukorokoro Miranda News

Pukorokoro Miranda Naturalists' Trust publishes *Pukorokoro Miranda News* four times a year to keep members in touch and provide news of events at the Shorebird Centre, the Hauraki Gulf and the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. No material may be reproduced without permission.
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See the birds

Situated on the Firth of Thames between Kaiaua and the Miranda Hot Pools, the Pukorokoro 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, especially around new and full moons. The Miranda high tide is 30 minutes before the Auckland (Waitemata) tide. Drop in to investigate, or come and stay a night or two.

Low cost accommodation

The Shorebird Centre has bunkrooms for hire and two self-contained units: Beds cost \$20 per night for members and \$25 for non-members. Self-contained units are \$70 for members and \$95 for non-members. For further information contact the Shorebird Centre.

Become a member

Membership of the Trust costs \$45 a year for individuals, \$55 for families and \$60 for those living overseas. Life memberships are \$1300 for those under 50 and \$750 for those 50 and over. As well as supporting the work of the Trust, members get four issues of PMNT News a year, discounts on accommodation, invitations to events and the opportunity to join in decisionmaking through the annual meeting.

Bequests

Remember the Pukorokoro Miranda Naturalists' Trust in your will and assist its vital work for migratory shorebirds. For further information and a copy of our legacy letter contact the Shorebird Centre.

Want to be involved?

Friends of Pukorokoro Miranda

This is a volunteer group which helps look after the Shorebird Centre. That can include assisting with the shop, guiding school groups or meeting people down at the hide. Regular days for volunteer training are held. Contact Maria Stables-Page for details.

Long term Volunteers

Spend four weeks or more on the shoreline at Miranda. If you are interested in staffing the Shorebird Centre, helping with school groups or talking to people on the shellbank for a few weeks contact Keith Woodley to discuss options. You can have free accommodation in one of the bunkrooms and use of a bicycle.

Firth of Thames Census

Run by Birds NZ (OSNZ) and held twice a year, the census days are a good chance to get involved with field work and research. This year's are on June 21 and November 15. Ask at the centre for details.

Contribute to the Magazine

If you've got something you've written, a piece of research, a poem or a photo send it in to *Pukorokoro Miranda News*. If you want to discuss your ideas contact Jim Eagles at eagles@clear.net.nz.

Help in the Shorebird Centre Garden

We can always use extra hands in the Miranda Garden, be it a half hours weeding or more ambitious projects. If you do have some spare time please ask at the centre for ideas, adopt a patch and call it your own or feel free to take up any garden maintenance you can see needs doing.

Celebrate the Year of the Godwit

To mark its 40th birthday the Pukorokoro Miranda Naturalists' Trust has declared 2015 to be **the Year of the Godwit**

The Shorebird Centre shop is joining in the festive spirit with some great godwit goodies

Why not drop down to the centre, buy from our amazing range of gifts and then sneak out and watch the birds . . . if you spend more than \$250 we'll even let you use one of our spotting scopes for free

Or, if you really can't find the time to visit, ring 09 2322 781 with your credit card handy, or use our on-line shop at www.shorebird.org.nz



Look cool in our unique godwit tee-shirts designed by member Anne Buckmaster. Only \$24.95 and available in several colours and in ladies and unisex styles



Handcrafted pottery mugs, by Lynda Harris, \$25.90, each painted with a godwit or wrybill

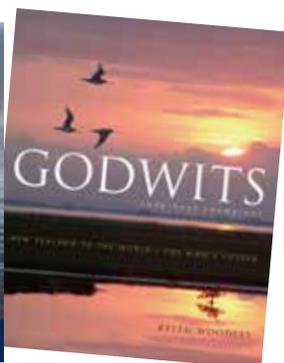
Check out New Zealand's finest range of bird books

We stock books about birds, especially godwits, for birders of all ages, including:

The Very Important Godwit Book, by Jenny Patrick, \$36.90

E3 Call Home, by Janet Hunt, \$25.90

Godwits: longhaul champions, by Keith Woodley, \$49.90



Keep the sun at bay with caps bearing our godwit and Wrybill logo designed by manager Keith Woodley. \$24.95

Bolster your reputation as a great cook with our large barista style godwit aprons. \$29.90 in any colour you like so long as it is black

