

# NEW ZEALAND WADER STUDY GROUP

*In association with*

Miranda Naturalists' Trust

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Compiled by Adrian Riegen

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## **New Snipe Found on Campbell Islands**

For waderphiles the ultimate dream must be to find a new species of wader. On 9 November 1997 a Department of Conservation team searching for Campbell Island Teal on the 19 hectare Jacquemart Island, just south of the main island, caught a snipe and saw seven others.

There had been no evidence of snipe on Campbell Islands, although the main island was settled by whalers and sealers before ornithologists visited the region. Rats probably made short work of the snipe in those early days and only a remnant population survived on Jacquemart.

Interestingly, scientists who visited the island in 1980 and 1984 did not find the snipe.

It will probably turn out to be a sub-species of the New Zealand Snipe *Coenocorypha aucklandica*, which is still found on the subantarctic Snares, Auckland and Antipodes Islands and was once found on Stewart and Little Barrier Islands.

## **Banding Update And New Recoveries**

On 29 November 1997 the NZWSG caught 246 birds at Jordan's which included 162 new Red Knot and 9 retraps, and 75 Bar-tailed Godwit. Three of the Knot had been banded in Australia.

As an exercise in rapid communication and trans-Tasman cooperation, we used a cell phone to call Janice Riegen in Auckland. Janice 'phoned Clive Minton in Melbourne and a few minutes later Clive faxed back to Janice details of the three Australian birds. Janice then 'phoned us. Within 20 minutes we had the details of those birds while still processing the catch.

The result of this communication web was that all three Knot had been banded in Victoria by the Victorian Wader Study Group, two of them only six weeks earlier on 18 October 97. On that same day the VWSG caught one of our Knot. As one would expect in any trans-Tasman clash the score is very much in New Zealand's favour, with 21 Victorian birds caught in New Zealand, to one New Zealand bird caught in Victoria.

This continues to show quite strongly the movement of birds from Victoria to New Zealand. At least 14 of the 21 were banded as first or second year birds in Victoria. From this it appears many young birds spend their first winter in Victoria before moving onto New Zealand.

Then as adults they continue to return directly to New Zealand. A catch at Jordan's on 14 February of 88 Red Knot was remarkable for not having any Australian birds among them, but one had been banded at Jordan's in February 1987.

Also 37 Wrybill were caught that day. None were banded. Of these, 33 were first year birds - a very high percentage. It is unlikely the catch was a representative sample of the birds there. About 180 birds were present, but the day before there had been over 300.

On the night of 7 March 1998 Tony Habraken, Paul Rose and Adrian Riegen spent an interesting few hours mist netting waders on the south Manukau Harbour. Only a few Red Knot, Bar-tailed Godwit and South Island Pied Oystercatchers were caught as conditions were not ideal.

Another catch on the night of 27 March proved excellent with 24 full adult Red Knot caught, all in good breeding plumage. They were all big birds with an average weight of 191 grams. Their lean weight during the summer is around 110-120 grams. Seven of the birds weighed over 200 grams, with the largest being 212 grams.

Impressive as this sample was, the catch of the night was a first winter Little Tern. This is the first Little Tern ever caught in New Zealand as far as I am aware.

## **Marsh Sandpipers At Miranda**

As a follow up to Keith Woodley's article in Miranda News number 28 on Marsh Sandpipers, it is worth noting that the five birds present at Miranda this summer represent the largest flock of this species ever recorded in New Zealand. Several groups of four birds have been noted in the past. In 1991 Phil Battley wrote in *The Stilt* about the particularly good season for Marsh Sandpipers of 1988-89.

The first confirmed New Zealand sighting of a Marsh Sandpiper was from the Manukau harbour in 1959. Since then they have been seen at various sites in the North and South Islands. They are less common than one might think, probably because those that do arrive here tend to stay for sometime and are regularly observed. Some rare waders like the Phalaropes have a habit of turning up for just a day or so and then disappearing.

Dick Sibson wrote much about the wader species seen at Miranda and the following are unpublished comments he made about Marsh Sandpiper in the mid 1980's.

“Although this elegant species is a rare visitor to New Zealand, the number of recorded occurrences is steadily increasing. Brackish shallow, freshwater pools and flooded paddocks which attract stilts may also lure down the occasional Marsh Sandpiper. In the eyes of some observers, the flight silhouette is that of a miniature Pied Stilt. Sometimes over-eager rarity-hunters have been tempted to identify young stilts, not fully grown as Marsh Sandpiper until they take a more critical look.

The first Marsh Sandpiper to be found in New Zealand spent some months of the summer of 1959 between Puketutu Island and Mangere where the first two ponds of the Mangere sewage treatment plant were under construction. At that time there was a prolific hatch of midges.

The first Marsh Sandpiper on the Firth of Thames was seen just after full tide on 24 April 1963, near the mouth of the Waitakaruru River just south of Miranda. Evidently it stayed in the Firth all winter moving north to Miranda where it was studied and photographed, usually among or near Pied Stilts.

The next Marsh Sandpiper at Miranda was not seen until 7 May 1980 and for two years until 18 April 1982 the creeks and pools of the Firth fulfilled its needs. When it arrived in New Zealand it was probably a tired youngster, lost, lonely and hungry. Fortunately for its second and third years, when it was equivalent to a teenager, it had alighted upon a quiet stretch of coast, rich in food. Did it eventually head north for some mysteriously remembered marsh in eastern Asia?”

Since Dick wrote those words Marsh Sandpipers have been seen at Miranda on five separate occasions until this year, all but one staying for some time - one in the winter of 1986; one from June to October 1988; one from 29 September 1990 until 25 April 1991, with a second bird seen only on 22 November 1990; one from 18 April 1992 until 27 June 1993 - the last record until the five in this El Nino summer of 1997-98.

Look for them in the stilt pools beside the road just north of the Limeworks.

### **South Island Pied Oystercatchers Versus White-fronted Terns**

On 31 January 1998, I was at Miranda for a council meeting. With just a few minutes to spare for birding before the meeting, I stopped at the Limeworks for a quick look at the waders. The tide was coming in and most waders were settling down to roost - godwit, knot and wrybill in the Stilt Pools and SIPO on the shellbanks.

There had been a large colony of Black-billed Gulls and White-fronted Terns nesting on the tip of the shellbank over the summer, but by now there were just a few terns still with chicks.

At this point the entire flock of SIPO (5000+) lifted off the last of the mudflats and landed en-masse on the shell bank completely covering the tern breeding ground. The SIPO landed so quickly and densely that the tern chicks were unable to escape and were completely surrounded by SIPO, which caused them considerable distress.

SIPO, which are not known for giving way to any other species when at roost, proceeded to hassle the tern chicks. When adult terns arrived with fish for their young they had a problem of firstly finding their youngsters and then landing. Some of the SIPO would have none of that, repeatedly stabbing at the adult terns with their bills as they attempted to land. Some terns did manage to land but others were forced to stay airborne.

I was unable to stay long enough to follow proceedings and left wondering what impact SIPO would have on a colony if the chicks had been younger or the terns were still on eggs. Fortunately for the gulls and terns the SIPO do not arrive back from the South Island until the breeding season is near its end.

***Adrian Riegen***

### **Migrating Pied Oystercatchers (SIPO)**

Records of migrating groups of SIPO from the Waikato's west coast have been kept as part of our coastal Bird Record Scheme, organized by Stella Rowe and the Ornithological Society of New Zealand. Beach patrollers looking for dead seabirds are asked to keep a record of every live bird seen. So far this season SIPO migration records have been noted on five occasions. Other records of such movements would be most valuable, so if you have any please pass them on.

SIPO breed in the South Island and many migrate north after breeding to the Auckland region. Little is known

about the migration route or time taken but these sightings certainly help us to understand better their strategies.

14.12.97 Waikaretu Beach, 5 flying north.

22.12.97 Taharoa, 10 flying north.

07.01.98 Taharoa, 127 in transit North, in 7 flocks ranging from 4-25 birds. A flock of 25 landed for less than 15 minutes.

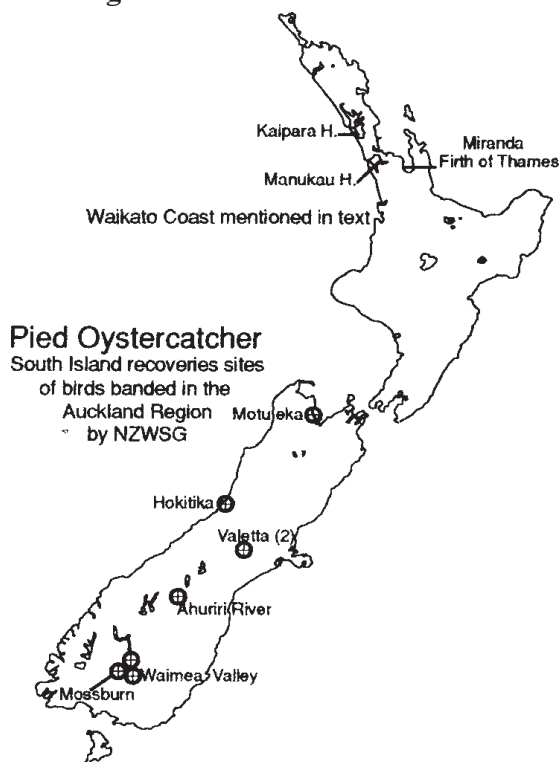
23.01.98 Kawhia, 5 groups of 14, 17, 17, 13, 15 = 76, flying low overhead northward.

30.01.98 Waikorea, 2 groups of 12, 2 = 14, flying north.

Many probably make the journey in a single flight. Mid-Canterbury to Auckland is about 700km direct and from Southland about 1100km. Flight speeds are not accurately known but 50-60kph is probably a reasonable speed, which would mean the flight takes 12 to 14 hours from Canterbury and 18 to 22 hours from Southland. For a wader this is not a particularly long time or distance.

Bev Woolley noted the low flying Waikorea birds were in contrast to the high flying Taharoa birds of 07.01.98. The Kawhia groups were at various heights. Many observers agreed that flocks could be missed due to lack of calling birds, and the fact that during beach patrols, observers are looking down rather than up...

**Paul Cuming**



## Banded SIPO Found Dead in Southland

Pied Oystercatcher K-5504 was banded at Jordan's on the Kaipara (36°34'S - 174°21'E) on 21.01.95 as an adult. It was found dead on a farm in the Waimea Valley (45°57'S - 168°35'E) near Gore in Southland on 05.10.97 by farm owner Mark Whelan. It was 1220km from the banding site and 2 years 9 months later.

Mark and his wife Diane who is principal at the local Dipton School were interested to know more about this bird. I was happy to send details of it and migrating waders in general. The information was used by Diane at school, which aroused some interest among the children, many of whom had SIPO on their farms.

Mark informed me that they had had several SIPO nest this summer on the farm and that the day before I visited them on 13 January there were 19 SIPO in his turnip paddock.

**Adrian Riegen**

## Getting Down to the Guts of Wader Research!

A delightfully titled paper by world famous 'Knotoholic' Theunis Piersma of The Netherlands and Robert Gill of Alaska - 'Guts Don't Fly: Small Digestive Organs in Obese Bar-tailed Godwits' - discusses the changes that take place inside these birds prior to long distance migration.

They worked with three samples of birds. One sample was from the Alaskan Peninsula, involving a number of birds killed when they flew into a radar dome on the night of 19 October 1987. The second sample was of 40 birds confiscated from a poacher near Great Exhibition Bay in New Zealand's Far North, on 7 March 1992. A third sample used for the purpose of comparison comprised birds studied at refuelling sites in The Netherlands.

The first two samples were sent to Theunis Piersma who conducted a detailed analysis of fat deposits and internal organs. Both sets of birds were close to or had started on migration and their fat deposits were very large. In the Alaskan birds an average of 55% of their total weight was fat, while for the New Zealand birds it was 43%.

Other data found that the 'exercise' organs (heart, breast muscle) were a larger percentage and the 'nutritional' organs (gizzard, liver, kidney) were a smaller percentage to total body weight, when compared with the birds studied from the Netherlands refuelling sites.

The extremely fat Bar-tailed Godwits from Alaska probably died just as they embarked on a trans-Pacific flight. The small or nutritional organs of those birds is consistent with the suggestion that it is unprofitable and energetically too expensive to carry a digestive system over thousand of kilometres of open ocean. It seems better to get rid of such tissue even before takeoff, and to rebuild the strategically discarded body parts on arrival at the destination. However firm proof of this remains to be gathered.

The matter of how far these birds can travel in a single

flight is still being investigated, but it is likely to be a very long distance. Watch this space for more on these fascinating birds.

A copy of this paper and many others are held in the Miranda Shorebird Centre Library. They are there for all to read. A list of titles is kept at Miranda so don't hesitate to ask if you wish to read any of them.

Piersma T, and Gill R, *Guts Don't Fly: Small Digestive Organs in Obese Bar-tailed Godwits*, Auk 115(1): 196-203 1998.

## Hi-Tech Tracking Of Eastern Curlews

In the second year of a joint Queensland Wader Study Group (QWSG) and Wild Bird Society of Japan project, satellite transmitters were fitted to nine Eastern Curlews at Mirrapool, Moreton Island, Queensland on 29 and 31 January 1998. Last year 15 transmitters were fitted and they revealed some fascinating details of Eastern Curlew migration which was reported in NZWSG News number 10.

Just catching the Curlews was a major challenge. You can read more about this in QWSG News issue 23 at the Miranda Shorebird Centre.

I'm sure these nine Curlews will reveal more fascinating facts about their migration and we will bring details of them as they come to hand.

### STOP PRESS

On 3<sup>rd</sup> April, 1998, we heard that one of the Curlews has already reached Japan, making news headlines and getting television coverage.

## Gulf Of Carpentaria And The BIG Wet

One of the most important shorebird sites on the East Asian-Australasian Flyway is the Gulf of Carpentaria in northern Queensland. Some 200, 000 migrant shorebirds use the area annually. Many spend the summer there, while others like Red Knot from New Zealand are presumed to use the area as a staging site on their migration.

Very little shorebird research has been conducted in the area, but hopefully this is about to change. The QWSG and AWSG mounted a mini expedition to the southeast part of the Gulf during March 1998.

The aim of the project is to extend previous broad-based aerial survey work by placing scientists on the ground in the Gulf to study shorebirds in further detail. The project will be conducted by (a) surveying areas for shorebirds

from the air and from the ground/water, (b) mapping important intertidal feeding and high tide roosting areas, and (c) catching shorebirds and fitting them with leg bands, flags, and radio or satellite transmitters to determine local or international movement patterns.

Flooding often occurs in the Gulf country, but this wet season has become the year of 'The Big Wet', which is making life difficult for all concerned. The group has experienced great problems just reaching the Gulf. It is hoped they can get through and undertake some useful studies.

## Red Knot Turns Red In USA

In North America, sixteen species have recently been listed as being of the greatest conservation concern ('red alert'). Three of the species are waders - Mountain Plover *Charadrius montanus*, Buff-breasted Sandpiper *Tryngites subruficollis* and Red Knot *Calidris canutus*. Of these perhaps the most surprising is the Red Knot - identified as vulnerable because the species is dependent on just a few sites.

This is a timely warning for us on the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. Although Red Knot and Bar-tailed Godwit for that matter are found here in abundance at the moment they, like their counterparts in the North America, are dependant on just a few widely spaced sites for refuelling during their long annual migrations. Some of these sites have already been lost and others will continue to be lost to human based developments particularly in East Asia.

Without suitable refuelling sites these birds simply won't survive.

*Any articles for this publication or sightings of banded or flagged birds should go to:*

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