

NEW ZEALAND WADER STUDY GROUP

in association with

Miranda Naturalists' Trust

Newsletter No.2

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Compiled by: Adrian Riegen

NATIONAL WRYBILL

CENSUS - 29 May 1994

The NZWSG has for some years been concerned with the status of the Wrybill population. Hence the intensive banding programme particularly at Miranda. It is most important that we find out the recruitment rates and how long they live. In order to find out how long Wrybill I live we have been working hard to catch those that were banded in 1980 so that we can replace their very worn bands before they become totally illegible or fall off. In 1993 we caught 6 birds that were first banded in 1980.

The Handbook of Australian and New Zealand Birds (HANZAB), Vol. 2, puts the mean Wrybill population at 5140 based on figures between 1975-80 (R Hay 1984). It is a pity that data from the winter wader census counts was not used in

HANZAB as the census figures from 1984-1993 do not look so impressive, with a mean of just 3743, a decrease of some 27%. If this is the case then we have good reason to be concerned.

The national Wrybill census being organised by NZWSG, with MNT and OSNZ, will try to establish as accurately as possible the total population, bearing in mind that 37-40 birds represents 1% of the total population. In contrast, 1% of the Bar-tailed Godwits in New Zealand each year is around 800.

We are concerned for the Wrybill and hope as many people as possible will help on **29 May 1994**. If you can, please contact Adrian Riegen, 09-814-9741, as soon as possible.

GODWIT BANDING IN ALASKA

At Kgun Lake in both 1992 and 1993, we captured a handful of post breeding godwits which walked into stationary northern pintail traps baited with corn. In 1992 we banded 15 Bar-tailed Godwits and two Hudsonian Godwits with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service bands; one of the Bar-tailed Godwits was recaptured in 1993 in Moreton Bay, southeast Queensland, Australia. In 1993 our crew captured and colour banded four godwits at Kgun Lake which they identified as Hudsonians.

- from Brian McCaffery,

Dept. Fish and Wildlife Alaska

NOTE: A Bar-tailed Godwit was seen at Miranda with colour bands on 16.10.93. The mystery is that the colour combination seemed to match one that was placed on a Hudsonian Godwit in Alaska. So questions are being asked about the identity of the bird! - Ed

SOUTH ISLAND PIED OYSTERCATCHER BANDING IN SOUTH ISLAND

Last week was really great for reports of our colour banded SIPO. Each day brought fresh reports and by the end of the week, I'd added sightings of eight breeding birds and several of known age birds to the file. Two of the breeding birds were banded in the past season, so it's the first reports of their non-breeding dispersal. All the other six birds were reported back at the same sites where they had been seen in previous years. Reports of these birds have come from the Avon-Heathcote Estuary (3),

Farewell Spit (3), Wade River (1), Whangarei Harbour (1).

The 1993 breeding season was all over in our study area by the end of November. We finished the season banding 14 adults (seven each male and female) and 29 chicks, so breeding success was a bit above average. m

- from Paul Sagar

Tony Habraken, never one to let us down when it comes to colour band and flag sightings, saw five SIPO at Karaka, South Manukau, on 1.2.94 with colour bands.

BAR-TAILED GODWIT RECOVERY

At approximately 6.30pm on 7 March 1994 one godwit from a flock which was flying from the Manukau Harbour to the Tamaki Estuary struck the high tension power lines near Panama Road, Mt Wellington. This flock was flying with a 25 knot tail wind and the weather was fine.

The bird was retrieved and handed to Dick Veitch the next day. It weighed 335g and showed no sign of breeding plumage. There was some moult of body feathers but the emerging feathers were lightly coloured. There was no indication of the fat deposits expected on a migrating bird at this time of year.

This bird was banded with an Australian band number and had a green flag on the right tibia. This will mean that the bird was banded in Queensland probably around the Brisbane region.

At this time of year it is common

to see waders crossing this part of the Auckland isthmus before and after high tide on the Manukau Harbour. The gap between midtide roosts in the Westfield arm of the Manukau Harbour and the nearest large part of the Tamaki Estuary is just 4km. If the birds fly from the midtide roosts, which are west of the Mangere sewage ponds, to a favoured loafing area close to Tahuna Torea in the Tamaki Estuary, then the distance is more like 18km.

- Dick Veitch

Peter Driscoll tells me this bird was banded as a 1st or 2nd year bird by the QWSG at Nudgee Beach near Brisbane on 3 May 1993 - Ed

BANDED CURLEW SANDPIPER SIGHTINGS

Tony Habraken is complaining that we are putting the metal bands on waders upside down, which is making it very difficult for him to read the band numbers in the field! He informs me though, that a visit to Seagrove, South Manukau Harbour on 10 April, 94 turned up amongst other things 28 Curlew Sandpipers, two of which had metal bands. On closer inspecting and with the aid of his impressive telescope he was able to make out some of the numbers and the words New Zealand on the bands.

From this we are able to say that one was banded on 21 April 1992 and the other either on 21 April or 7 July 1992 at Miranda on the Firth of Thames. Both were coming into breeding plumage and will no doubt leave for the Arctic by the end of April or the first week of May. They are often one of the last species to leave, but have to travel the furthest to the nesting ground.

THE NEW ZEALAND DOTTEREL BANDING PROGRAMME

Individual colour-banding of New Zealand Dotterel chicks was begun in 1950 by Ross McKenzie, making the species, I suspect, one of the earliest to be colour-banded in New Zealand. Unfortunately the colour bands used in those days only lasted about a year and much

information was lost. Later, more durable colour bands became available and in 1974 Sylvia Reed began banding adults. At the time of Sylvia's death in 1981, about 170 birds had been banded in total, most of them around the Auckland harbours, at Mangawhai or in the South Kaipara. Results of these studies were summarised in *Notornis articles* in 1978 and 1981.

By the time I became interested in the species in 1985, few of these birds were still alive and carrying all their bands: those that were still recognisable were quite widely scattered so a fresh start seemed appropriate. Since 1986, we have concentrated on the east coast north of Auckland and now have virtually all the adults (about 75) between the Wade River mouth (near Silverdale) and Poutawa Stream on Pakiri Beach banded. We have already gathered a lot of information on movement patterns and site fidelity: as observations continue we are also learning more about the survival and pair-bond retention, as well as picking up useful moult and measurement data. Many people have helped with this fieldwork at different times, but Simon Chamberlin, Nan Rothwell and Elaine Murphy have been the regular stalwarts.

Another important part of the study at the moment is looking at the survival and dispersal of juveniles. Over the past six seasons, we have banded nearly 200 chicks - many of them have not fledged of course but enough have to allow us to start building up a picture of the first few years of life of the average dotterel. Richard Parrish (Northland) and Bev Woolley and Phil Thomson (Coromandel) have made major contributions in banding chicks and collecting sightings in their areas. Unfortunately, I don't think we can justify using many more individual combinations on chicks, so from next season I intend to change to a system where all chicks at one

locality in one season get the same combination.

One thing we still don't know a lot about is longevity, so I am currently trying to find any of the pre-1981 birds that are still alive. Those found so far have had worn metals and occasional wafer-thin colour bands, so catching and rebanding them is a priority at the moment. Obviously, I would like to hear about any possible "oldies" that anyone sees. There are some on South Kaipara Head that I haven't tried to re-trap yet and the most likely place for others is around South Auckland.

The banding programme on Stewart Island is largely conservation-oriented. The southern population has declined rapidly in the past 40 years (at the last count there were only about 70 birds left, with a heavy bias towards females), so birds are being banded to help keep a check on total numbers each year and to monitor annual survival of adults.

- John Dowding

Extract from unpublished papers

R.B. SIBSON - BIRDS OF THE FIRTH OF THAMES

FAR EASTERN CURLEW (*Numenius madagascariensis*)

Far Eastern Curlews are the largest of the Arctic waders which regularly come to New Zealand. Compared with many other northern migrants, the species has rather a limited breeding range. After they have flown south, the bulk of the population winters along the northern and eastern coasts of Australia, only a few score reaching New Zealand.

The first curlew to be duly "logged" in the Firth of Thames was a solitary bird, which wandered calling rather forlornly in early April 1942, between Karito and Piako, at the southern end of the Firth of Thames.

The following spring on 27th September at Karito flock, upon flock of godwits and knots streamed past, presumably seeking exposed mud where they could start feeding. Then four curiously

silent curlews flew up from the direction of Piako, turned and flew back. They were the last to be seen on the Firth for more than a decade, despite numerous surveys at all seasons. But much of the muddy southern end remained rather inaccessible and still is.

Then in June 1953, hope was renewed when Noelle MacDonald reported that she had found two curlews near Karito. They remained at least until near the end of the next February. More lean years followed; but four curlews in March 1957 gave a ray of hope and again two, perhaps the product of the preceding breeding season, overwintered. Meanwhile in the Manukau Harbour, after many years of wader-watching and counting, a single curlew had appeared in mid May 1955, near the Puketutu causeway.

For curlew watchers, a new era began in 1957 when the largest flock so far recorded in New Zealand, which some were tempted to call the Twelve Apostles, added distinction to the muddy estuaries of the southern end of the Firth. Ten stayed on, miraculously surviving the hazards of the shooting season, often favouring the edge of the mangroves now growing vigorously on the south side of Pukorokoro Creek. Better still was to come - by 30th October 1958, six more had arrived and joined the local ten. Further afield, Ross and Hetty McKenzie, boldly and hopefully exploring the South Island, came back with the news of thirteen curlews on Farewell Spit in early November.

The records show that since 1957 there have usually been some curlews in the Firth at all seasons. We know little of the more distant past, but since 1941, there were peak years in the 1960's, 26 in 1961-62, and 27 in 1968-69. By way of comparison, it is interesting to note that at Farewell Spit the biggest flocks recorded were 37 in 1962 and 36 in 1967. It is an exhilarating experience to be able to watch a

score or more of these majestic shorebirds in unhurried flight and to hear their far-carrying calls.

Generally numbers in the 1970's seem to have declined, but 19, in 1976-77, raised hopes of a resurgence. Similar declines have been noted at Farewell Spit, in Tasmania and along the south eastern coasts of Australia. In the early 1980's we were lucky, it seems, if we could find ten curlews together anywhere in New Zealand.

Although it has been true that some returning curlews may reach New Zealand in early August, on the Miranda coast the newcomers generally appear about mid September. They can be lean and very tired. Thus on 9th September 1962, as the weather cleared after a wet and windy night, sixteen were asleep high on the beach at Kaiaua, close beside the road and indifferent to passing cars and three goggling admirers. Only unwillingly did they untuck and reveal their long bills.

Once the ebb-tide has set in, curlews are able to keep their distance. They do not like being hemmed in. Formerly most sightings of curlews, especially when they were in flocks, were made near Karito or Waitakaruru, but the spread of mangroves has narrowed their feeding grounds and robbed them of some elevated banks where they could gather in safety with an open view on all sides. More recently the rise and advance of the massive banks of dead shells which now threaten to enclose Access Bay, have become a much used refuge for curlews, as they also are to tens of thousands of other shorebirds, large and small.

New Zealand's few curlews are dark-backed. They are also a little larger than the pale-backed European species, so famous in literature and music. Because these curlews were much better-known than godwits in Britain, early colonists sometimes referred to the common godwits as curlews or even snipe. Manukau Harbour quickly earned a reputation among sportsmen for its excellent curlew

shooting. Peter Bull, who grew up on the shore of this bird-rich harbour recounts that curlew was known as a King Curlew. Regrettably we do not know how often they were seen or shot locally among the great flocks of godwits. There are few specimens in museums. Such trophies of the case were epicurean fare and ended up in the pot. We have no means of knowing how numerous or regular they were before European Man introduced firearms. Now if you wish to see and hear these big curlews in New Zealand, the Miranda coast is as likely a place as any.

- R.B. Sibson

EASTERN CURLEWS AT MIRANDA

An update by Keith Woodley 1994

From May 1993, 7 Eastern Curlews were present at Miranda. Present also, and usually associated with them, was an Asiatic Whimbrel. 9 curlews were present in late December, while 11 were seen on 2.1.94. Of the 7 curlew first observed in May 93, 2 were in breeding plumage. It is likely these birds had arrived from elsewhere within New Zealand, perhaps Farewell Spit. The following is a series of random observations of these birds during the period until March 1994.

From May to November the curlews and the whimbrel were almost always seen along the southwestern margins of the Miranda area. A common pattern for them was to feed near the mouth of the Pukorokoro Creek at the Limeworks, while roosting on or near the shellbank at Access Bay. They remained extremely wary and difficult to approach through out this period. In mid November the curlews were seen roosting at Taramaire, about 2km to the north. By the end of November regular sighting indicated they had settled upon Kaiaua as their favoured roosting site. This small village,

about 7km north of the Limeworks, is the only densely populated area on the western shores of the Firth. It is interesting therefore, that these most wary birds, should start to roost there regularly. Indeed, one roost site was near a boat launching area, which, during the summer was the scene of intense human activity. Many more Arctic migrants arrived on the Firth between late November and early December. Large flocks of oystercatchers also began returning from the South Island in mid-December. Perhaps this increase in other species was a factor in the curlew's move northwards.

Like many species the curlews like to segregate themselves from other species on the high tide roost. The whimbrel also likes to segregate itself from the curlews with which it was so often associated. The distance between the curlews and other birds on the roost on or near the shellbank at Access Bay, varied between 1-2 to 15-20 metres. On the occasion when the massed flocks of waders flew - whether because of the changing tide, or the appearance of a harrier - the curlews and whimbrel immediately

segregated themselves from the main flock. Often the main flock would wheel around towards the west and south while the curlews wheeled out to seaward and to the north. On several occasions they remained flying over the Firth for 56 minutes after the other flocks had settled again.

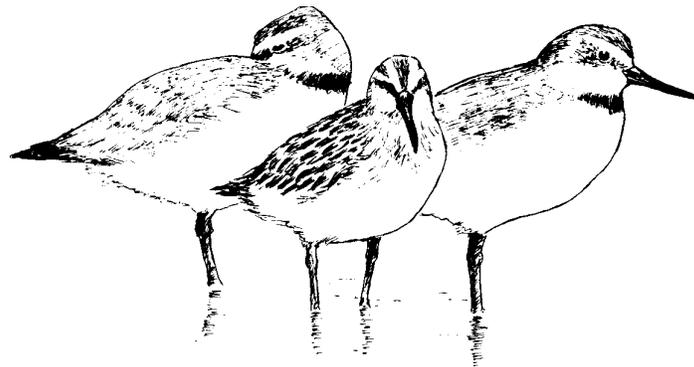
On several occasions curlews were observed being chased by godwits. In one instance a group of three godwit appeared to be chasing a curlew for several minutes over the seaward side of the shellbank at Access Bay. On another occasion a large flock of mainly godwit and oystercatchers were roosting in paddocks west of the coast road. A small flock flew up and three curlews were observed flying in what appeared to be an evasive manner, each being chased by a godwit. After at least a minute, the curlews, flying low, headed off towards the Limeworks. The godwits then landed again among the flock.

Whenever feeding behaviour of the curlews was observed, the main food source appeared to be the common mud crab (*Helice crassa*). When feeding in the area of the Pukorokoro Creek mouth, the curlews spent much of their

time in the water working up and down the edges of the channel. Most other feeding birds-especially godwits, knot and wrybills, worked the mud ridges on either side.

When the birds were roosting on or near the shellbank at Access Bay, they spent much time fossicking in amongst some salicornia. It is a plant growing quite commonly along the shellbank and other coastal margins, but the curlews appeared to favour a particular clump. At low tide I was able to examine this area but with my untrained eye could detect nothing to distinguish it from other clumps of salicornia.

At the time of going to press there are still several curlews to be seen along the coast - Ed



Broad-billed Sandpiper and Wrybills
SKETCH - KEITH WOODLEY