

# Pūkorokoro Miranda News

Journal of the Pūkorokoro Miranda Naturalists' Trust

August 2021 Issue 121

## Finding the nest of the Kuaka



### Special godwit issue

PLUS: 1000 volunteer hours of planting  
PMNT seeks to employ a ranger  
A SIPO called ET calls home





WAITING FOR A HOME: David Lawrie and Keith Woodley check out the pegs marking the proposed site of the new Manager's Roost. Photo / Jim Eagles

## Council to investigate funding for fulltime ranger

PMNT is to seek funding to appoint a fulltime ranger to cover a wide range of roles but particularly to focus on the restoration of the Findlay Reserve and working with the local community and visitors to increase interest in shorebirds.

The Council last month agreed that before going ahead it would need to have funding assured to cover both salary and logistical costs for at least five years meaning around \$500,000 would be needed. As a first step, manager Keith Woodley and immediate-past-chair Gillian Vaughan are meeting with Foundation North to see if it would meet the criteria for its Gulf Innovation Together or Community Grants programmes.

However, a report from Keith said other possible sources were Waikato Regional Council's Natural Heritage Fund, the Community Waikato Tindall Foundation, the Ministry for the Environment's Freshwater Improvement Fund and the Ministry for the Environment's Community Environment Fund.

The Council has been discussing such an appointment for some time, mainly because the successful steps towards restoration of the Findlay Reserve have involved a huge amount of volunteer time - 1050 hours for this year's planting - which is probably unsustainable.

But Keith's report identified a number of other areas a ranger could work in:

- \*Maintenance of trails and hides at the

reserve, including weed management around the hides to maintain view shafts.

- \*Act as Shore Guide and as back-up for visiting schools and interest groups.

- \*Regulate water levels in the Stilt Pond once effective drainage control is restored.

- \*Do weed control on the shellspit.

- \*Assist with pest control work.

- \*Continue restoration of the Reserve including planting, weed control and raising plants in the existing nursery.

- \*Coordinate volunteers and make volunteering a more enjoyable experience.

In particular, Keith said, having a fulltime ranger would provide a wonderful opportunity for PMNT to develop closer relations with Ngāti Paoa and the local community and tap into their expertise.

### Manager's roost

The new Manager's Roost is all set to go but Hauraki District Council approval to move it on to site will probably not come through until next month.

As announced in *PM News 119*, the fundraising campaign launched by Ann Buckmaster has successfully raised the \$213,000 needed for the house itself. In addition, there is \$70,000 left over for other expenses such as extra-high piles, a deck and carport, water and drainage. The house itself has been finished for a while and Keith Hay Homes is keen to move it out of the construction yard.

David Lawrie, who is handling the

consent side of the operation, has received a Land Use Consent from the Council to put a house on the site, and has organised for an architect to submit a building consent, for engineers to investigate the site and design foundations, and had on-site discussions with a drainlayer who is ready to start work as soon as approval has come through. But processing of the necessary Building Consent is taking quite a lot longer than expected.

Last weekend David pegged out the corners to show where the house will be placed. However, he now thinks Council approval will probably not now be received until early September.

### Slow progress

Plans to develop a wetland on the Tiaki Repo ki Pūkorokoro Reserve opposite the Findlay Reserve continue to make slow progress.

Will Perry, who represents PMNT on the TRkP Trust, says a drainage scheme to protect neighbouring land has now been designed and is ready for the consent process. 'It involves a bund round the property and weirs at southern and northern ends to control water flowing in and out to avoid flooding adjoining farmland.' Will said none of the cost of doing this would fall on PMNT but would be up to TRkP and the participating farmers.

COVER: Photo of a female Bar-tailed Godwit sitting on the nest in Alaska, by Keith Woodley.



**NOT FOR US:** This floating visitor centre at Brockholes, in Lancashire, has been suggested by consultants as a possible model for a new Shorebird Centre. But the PMNT Council isn't keen.

### Revamped Centre

The Trust is going to follow up an offer from Destination Coromandel to pay for an investigation into ways in which the Shorebird Centre might be redeveloped to make it more attractive and sources of funding for doing the work.

Naturally enough Destination Coromandel – which sees the Centre as an important gateway attraction to the area – was keen to make it into an even more compelling 'bucket-list tourist attraction'.

The consultants employed to look into this came up with three options:

- \*To upgrade the displays and broaden their content by including Māori culture and climate change; offer scheduled, guided tours; and provide food and drink via a foodtruck.

- \*To use signage and landscaping to improve the arrival experience; refurbish the Centre by moving toilets to a dedicated block and using the space freed up for talks and modern displays; and offering shuttles to the Findlay Reserve.

- \*To create 'a stunning attraction' by building a floating visitor centre (similar to the Brockholes Nature Reserve Visitor Centre in the UK) on PMNT's grazing block opposite the Findlay Reserve offering wetland bird-watching and close access to the shorebird hides; providing modern interpretative displays and regular guided tours; and making it a unique venue for conferences or meetings.

Given the brief, it was no surprise that the consultants recommended the option of creating a stunning attraction. However, PMNT's Council – including

Keith Woodley who has actually visited Brockholes – was concerned this would move the Centre away from its core focus on shorebirds and coastal ecology to one as a tourist destination. As a result, it was decided not to take up that option, but to gratefully accept the chance to have the other two possibilities developed in detail, including exploring funding sources.

### Holidaying in New Caledonia



This Banded Dotterel with the memorable leg flag PAP has caused an ornithological rethink after being photographed (by Liliane Guisgant) holidaying in New Caledonia for the second year in a row.

The Banding Office newsletter surprised many ornithologists when it re-

ported in last September that PAP had been sighted in New Caledonia. Now the latest newsletter says, 'Well, PAP has done it again. It seems that the bird has a fondness for New Caledonia as it returned to the island in April this year.'

The newsletter quotes an ornithologist as saying this 'confirms that PAP wasn't just a vagrant to New Caledonia last year (ie had got a bit lost) but instead regularly migrates to this wintering site. A real surprise result given that the accepted wisdom is that coastal-breeding Banded Dotterels tend not to migrate very far, if at all, from their breeding sites.'

### Piako Roost

The stopbank breach, which let water from the Piako River into paddocks and thus created the Piako Roost, has been temporarily filled. This will allow Waikato Regional Council to remove mangroves and old fences and create a system to control water flow. The work is taking longer than expected so there will likely be disruption to the roost this summer.

## What's on at the Shorebird Centre

### Saturday 14 August: Mid-Winter Pot Luck Dinner

9 am Working Bee, birdwatching, 11.15am High Tide. 6pm Pot Luck Dinner followed by Team Quiz.

### 31 August - 2 September: Dotterel Management Course.

### Sunday 10 October: Autumn Migration Day

11am High Tides. Noon Speaker

### Sunday 7 November: Firth of Thames November Wader Census

9.58am High Tide. Contact Tony Habraken for further details.

### Council re-elected

The 46<sup>th</sup> AGM of the Pūkorokoro Miranda Naturalists' Trust attracted nearly 60 members. Treasurer Kevin Vaughan, secretary Trish Wells and Council members Adrian Riegen, Gillian Vaughan, David Lawrie, Ann Buckmaster, Ray Buckmaster, Jim Eagles, Bruce Postill, Trudy Lane, Wendy Hare and Will Perry were all re-elected unopposed. At a subsequent Council meeting Will Perry was re-elected unopposed as chair.

### Cycle trail concerns

PMNT is to approach Hauraki District Council to try to get traffic slowed in areas where cyclists on the Hauraki Cycle Trail cross the East Coast Road.

The issue was raised at the AGM by member Joe de Jong. At a subsequent Council meeting chair Will Perry agreed traffic could be 'pretty scary' when cyclists were crossing to get to the Centre and visibility was poor because of the bend.

The cycle trail has also had another big washout near Ray's Rest and consideration is being given to building a boardwalk to prevent it happening again. As part of preparations to open the trail by the end of the year, more signage is being installed and the sites of some small shelters, among them one at Access Bay, have been marked out.

### Membership increasing

Winter is a slower time for memberships at PMNT because there are fewer visitors, even though there is still much to see. But the Trust is slowly creeping towards a longstanding target of 800 members.

With 28 new members having joined in the past three months, from Whangarei to Invercargill, our total membership now stand at nearly 780. However, this includes over 50 New Zealand members who have not yet renewed for 2021. Our generous grace period will come to an end with the next magazine so if you haven't paid up yet please do so quickly.

With the annual Birds NZ conference held in Thames this year it was an excellent opportunity to tap into the wider birding community and tempt those not already PMNT members to join us. Catching oystercatchers on the Thames Coast also proved fruitful when local resident Neil Wondergem stopped by to see what we were doing, ended up helping out, joining PMNT and coming to the BirdsNZ conference. Then the fantastic planting effort at the Findlay Reserve pulled in a few newcomers.

So a warm welcome to: Margie and



REPORTING ON A BUSY YEAR: Chair William Perry gives his annual report to the AGM focussing on what individual Council members did during the year. Photo / Jim Eagles

Kerry Hepburn and Julie, Iain and Robyn Malcolm, as well as Julie Baverstock, Joe Bliss, Michelle Bradshaw, Jeanette Brooker & Basim Furat, Dan Burgin, Emma Chan, Rob Chappell, Nicola Everett, Natalie Forsdick, Anko Hanse, Annemieke Hendriks, Stephen Legg & Kirsten Olsen, Emilie McCallum, Suzanne Middleton, Jules Millar, Patrick Miller, Claudia Mischler, Jennifer Northover, Brenda Pinfold, Maggie & Max Purnell, Mags Ramsey, Bev Trowbridge, the Whittaker family and Anne Gummer.

### Youth membership

The PMNT Council will recommend to the next AGM that a new youth membership rate be offered to people aged 14 to 25 years. Membership co-ordinator Wendy Hare said the Trust should be doing more to attract young people. She proposed a subscription set at half the normal individual rate – meaning it would at present be \$25 – but should include a digital magazine only rather than the option of a printed one.

### Bird care training

As part of preparations for any future algal bloom event a bird care first-response course is being organised at the Centre and will be run by AGM speaker Lynn

Miller who runs BirdCare Aotearoa. The aim is to train DOC staff and volunteers. It is also hoped to get local vets involved.

### Off to see the plover

It's not just people who were flocking to Pūkorokoro Miranda to see the Lesser Sand Plover earlier this year. PMNT member Bruce Keeley reports picking up an insect hitchhiker keen to see it as well.

Bruce says he had just set out from Howick on his way to see the plover when



he stopped at a traffic light and 'saw what I assumed was an autumn leaf land on the car bonnet. It was, in fact, a *kīhikihi pounamu* orkatydid (shown in the photo), which I

expected would fly off when the car began to move.

'Instead, it turned its face into the breeze (like a roosting shorebird) and, with legs wide spread and shoulders hunched, stayed right there on the bonnet's smooth, shiny surface all the way to the Shorebird Centre, an hour-long journey, much of it at between 80 and 100kph, and with a strong southerly wind blowing.'



**SAVING BIRDS:** Guest speaker at the AGM was Lynn Miller who is general manager of BirdCare Aotearoa in West Auckland. Lynn, who has formidable bird vet qualifications and extensive experience overseas, gave a fascinating talk on how Bird Rescue has succeeded in greatly improving its success rate restoring injured birds. Photo / Jim Eagles

Upon arrival, Bruce says, he photographed his tenacious hitchhiker, and watched it slowly wiping its face with one front foot. 'It had one back leg missing, which makes the journey even more remarkable. A few minutes later it was gone.' Bruce still wonders 'if Katy did manage to see the Lesser Sand Plover. Unfortunately I did not.'

#### Can you hear this?

PMNT is looking at getting a better sound system so those attending talks and open days are better able to hear guest speakers and videos.

Adrian Riegen told last month's Council meeting that the Trust had recently received a payment of \$2,530 from DOC for costs involved in the recent catching of oystercatchers.

'Most of that is actually for Gillian [Vaughan] and me to cover our expenses,' he said. 'But we are happy to donate part of our refund to the Trust to go towards a better sound system. I'm sick of being at meetings where people can't hear what the speakers are saying or what is coming from the video clips they show.'

Council members are investigating what sort of system would be needed to provide good sound for guest speakers, accompanying videos in the Sibson

Room and perhaps a spillover gathering in the Wrybill Room.

#### Inspired by Sibi



Memories of how Dick Sibson (above, left) inspired a generation of young birders – as well as helping found PMNT – have been revived recently for one of those youngsters, Nick Ledgard (above, right), who is about to step down after 18 years as the chair of Ashley-Rakahuri Rivercare Group. The Group's mission is to improve breeding success for indigenous waders – with the focus on Wrybill, Black-fronted Tern and Black-billed Gull – whose populations have suffered from loss of braided river habitat, predation and human disturbance.

Nick says that with his time as the group's leader coming to an end, 'I am increasingly asked how my passion for birds was ignited. Since early childhood I was interested in nature, which was no

doubt the main reason why I ended up working with trees for all my professional life. But my particular interest in birds was nurtured during secondary school, where I was fortunate to have Dick Sibson, or "Sibi", as a teacher and mentor. Along with RA Falla and EG Turbott, he wrote the first edition of *A Field Guide to the Birds of NZ* in 1966.

'At school Sibi ran the Bird Club and organised field-trips which I now recognise as being extra special. We spent weeks helping the NZ Wildlife Service monitor birds on the off-shore islands in the Hauraki Gulf. We camped in the Hunua ranges to hear the Kōkako's dawn chorus. We spent days walking the west coast beaches picking up storm-wrecked seabirds. We frequently visited wader hot-spots around the Manukau Harbour and often travelled to the glistening mudflats and gleaming white shellbanks at Miranda to observe the flocks of migrant and endemic shore birds.

'My fondest memories of Miranda are of watching a flock of Wrybills weaving their flying ribbons in the sky, usually as dusk approached. The twisting and turning flock often involved thousands of birds moving in unison, as most of the New Zealand population was there. Those performances enthralled us all,

and to me expressed the fantasy freedom by which wild birds live. Ever since, the collective term I like most for a gathering of birds is “an expression of Wrybills”.

### Pest control

PMNT is moving to upgrade the level of pest control on the Findlay Reserve.

Manager Keith Woodley says trapping will continue to be done by a contractor paid by DOC and Living Water but a new contract has recently been signed which provides for monthly reports. ‘Once we’ve got up-to-date information we’ll be in a better position to assess what is going on.’

On the positive side the Western Firth Catchment Group is doing extensive trapping on most neighbouring farms which is likely stopping pests reaching the reserve.”

### Garden group

A new garden group to look after the grounds of the Shorebird Centre had its first outing last month and will meet on the first Wednesday of every month.

The group is organised by Sue Frostick, a birder and keen gardener, who has been caring for the grounds largely singlehanded for the past few years.

The weather forecast for this first gathering was not encouraging but five hardy workers turned up and tidied up the area around the Centre building and the Widgery Lake pond. Some dead trees were cut out and long grass round the pond trimmed and lots of weeding done



**BACK HOME:** The Shorebird Centre’s much-loved godwit sculpture is back in its place at the start of the trail to the hides after being reinstalled by Keith Woodley and Adrian Riegen. The wooden figure was never intended to be displayed outside so after a few years it suffered from rot. But it has now been restored by sculptor Warren Viscoe and will shortly get a waterproof coating. Photo / Jim Eagles

around the flax bushes. In addition a few small native trees were planted to fill some gaps along the side fence. Luckily the rain stayed away so at the end it was possible to light a bonfire and feed it with the dead flax leaves and weeds.

Sue said afterwards that it was good to see the improvements from a few hours work. ‘We look forward to seeing a few more volunteers next time.’ If you would like to help contact the Centre on 09 232 2781 or email [info@shorebirds.org.nz](mailto:info@shorebirds.org.nz).



**HAVING FUN:** Members of the Shorebird Centre’s new gardening group, Barb Smith, Sue Frostick and Darion Rowan enjoy a good burn-up

**Returning to the Centre**  
Centre assistant Chelsea Ralls is returning to work on 9 September after taking maternity leave for the birth of baby Riley. As a result we will be farewelling Anne Gummer who has done a great job filling in.

**Working bee jobs**  
Saturday 14 August is our annual mid-winter working bee with a high tide for birdwatching late morning and a pot-luck dinner and quiz in the evening.

The working bee starts at 9am and there are plenty of jobs to be done.

- Centre grounds (volunteer gardening coordinator Sue Frostick will direct activities): Cut the long grass between the mown area and the plants (scrubcutter needed); weed all around the pond, along the front fence line and close in around the plants (trowels and secateurs); remove dead flax leaves (scissors); cut back plants under Sue’s direction (secateurs); fill potholes in drive

- Building Maintenance: Clear spouting; clean external windows; remove rubbish from the garage to recycling centre; fill gap between the ground and the start of the entrance ramp; dust high cobwebs inside (extendable broom); replace broken light bulbs in the display cabinets; fix leaky skylight in women’s bathroom; fix kitchen tap washer in Whimbrel Room.

- Reserve: Nursery potting at Miranda Orchard.

For further details contact the Centre.



EYECATCHING: This bittern has made several appearance recently on the Shorebird Coast, mostly around the northern end of the Findlay Reserve, among other things entertaining the volunteers preparing for our planting day with antics like this eel-wrestle.  
Photo / Tony Green

## Moreporks and Bitterns liven up the scene as the SIPOs depart

The first report was a phone call early in the afternoon. 'At the Stilt Hide there is an owl or Morepork or something.' An hour later a family arrived at the Centre saying they too had seen an owl by the hide.

Still, I did retain some scepticism. After all, I had experienced many misreports over the years, such as people confusing Spur-winged Plovers with Royal Spoonbills, or Banded Rail with Kiwi. There was no record of Ruru on the Pūkoro-koro coast that I was aware of. But later in the afternoon I took advantage of a lull in visitors and headed down there.

Turning off the trail towards the hide, there was no mistaking the dark shape huddled in a corner of the northern wing of the hide: an adult Ruru/Morepork staring watchfully as I approached.

It had been suggested there was something wrong with it. I had this in mind as I ventured to within two metres to investigate, at which it took off and flew around the end of the hide into the mangroves. There was nothing wrong with that bird. The alarm of the four Goldfinches that rocketed out of the mangroves suggested they thought the same.

There was a strong northerly wind at the time, so the bird likely had found a good place to shelter. Even so, the exposed coastal fringe seemed a long way from where one would normally expect

to encounter one. HANZAB lists only one record in New Zealand for Ruru associated with mangroves. It is certainly a new record for the Findlay Reserve.

A Bittern/Matuku was present, often in good view, on the Reserve for a few days in June. There are now many records for this species for the area, yet sightings remain decidedly erratic.

Historically the New Zealand Bittern population was a casualty of the loss of 90 per cent of our wetlands. So, they are not numerous. They are also highly mobile, moving about the landscape as wetland water levels fluctuate. They can be shy and cryptic, skulking in cover.

At Pūkoro-koro most recent sightings have them associated with mangroves. On the other hand, they are large bulky birds and can be surprisingly prominent, especially if disturbed in the open. Then they might adopt their defence posture, in which they freeze to their full height, with their bills pointing up. Amidst tall cover this can be a very effective way of hiding. In the open it is quite the opposite.

Meanwhile a clear sign of mid-winter came on 23 June. That afternoon I watched the southward departure of 44 Pied Oystercatchers/Tōrea, with further departures the following day. My earliest record for a departure remains 22 June.

Keith Woodley

### Recent sightings at Pūkoro-koro

#### Arctic Migrants

- 640 Bar-tailed Godwit
- Red Knot
- 2 Turnstone
- 1 Curlew Sandpiper

#### NZ Species

- SI Pied Oystercatcher
- 1,950 Wrybill
- Pied Stilt
- 21 Royal Spoonbill
- 200 White-fronted Tern
- Banded Dotterel
- Black-billed Gull
- Variable Oystercatcher
- White-faced Heron
- NZ Dotterel
- 84 Caspian Tern
- Banded Rail
- NZ Bittern
- Ruru



A MYSTERY REVEALED: The first Kuaka nest seen by Keith Woodley.

Photos / Keith Woodley

# I have seen the nest of a Kuaka

To ancient Māori the Bar-tailed Godwits that visited every spring and summer were birds of wonder. They had a saying, 'Kua kite te kohanga kuaka?' or 'Who has seen the nest of the kuaka?' to describe a great mystery. Kuaka were sometimes said to accompany the spirits of the dead to Hawaiki or to have pointed the great Polynesian explorers towards the land of Aotearoa far to the south. Today we know these birds breed in Alaska and have tracked them flying 12,000km non-stop to New Zealand. But there are still very few New Zealanders who can reply to that mystical query: 'I have seen the nest of a Kuaka.' But Shorebird Centre manager **Keith Woodley** can.

I had been on the tundra for 12 days when, at 17:26 on 6 May, I watched a male godwit land on the snow across the slough opposite our camp. It was the first to be recorded at Old Chevak that season. Standing behind my scope, over 12,000 km from Pūkorokoro, it was an intensely thrilling moment for me. Over the next few days more godwits arrived, joining increasing throngs of swans and geese, plovers, turnstones, terns, ducks, gulls, and cranes. All restless and noisy, fizzing with energy and activity.

I had arrived in Alaska fully aware that godwit nests are not easy to find. Birds familiar as flocks in New Zealand, disperse to nest sites over vast areas of tundra. There might be one pair in several square kilometres. And the birds are cryptic and cunning, finely tuned by evolution to be cautious. There was every possibility I would spend weeks camped there and not see one.

A few days later there had been a lot of activity around our camp. Brian McCaffery and I watched courtship displays and territorial defence postures. We listened to the incredibly loud cries of males displaying overhead. The snow cover was receding rapidly and virtually all the tundra was now exposed. Only the sloping banks of the slough and nearby marshes still held snow and ice. Low lying areas of mosses were very soft and spongy.

By 12 May we had established that at least one pair had a territory within 500 metres of the old church, where we were based. Most convenient. This was the Boatshed Marsh pair that features in *Godwits: long-haul champions*. The next day we were joined by Dutch shorebird photographer Jan van de Kam and Eddie Corp a Yu'pik trainee ranger.

Monday 19 May proved to be auspicious, although it got off to a chilly start. Light rain the night before, had frozen overnight and there was a heavy layer of ice on my tent fly. Observations over the last two days had suggested our godwit pair were particularly interested in one section of tundra. We had watched copulations along with successful efforts by both birds to chase off any rivals. We had witnessed nest scraping at several locations within the area of interest. The following is an extract from my journal:

*Eddie came over just before 1400 and said, 'I have found their nest.' He had flushed the male from where he was sitting in the nest which contained one egg. It was in the broad sector that I had a hunch about given the behaviour of the last few days. I gave Eddie my water bottle to put 20m back from the nest before getting the flag. Despite being sorely tempted, having come all this way, I refrained from going to have a look at it, especially given the poor breeding success here in recent years. I stood off. Human scent is considered a lethal marker for foxes and the like. (Talking with Brian later I said I felt exhilarated to be where they are nesting – that I haven't actually seen it does not matter.) Later as we headed back to camp the female came over and landed 150m or so past where the nest is. She perched prominently for a minute or two, then advanced before stopping again. Eventually she was in the vicinity of the nest, and we assumed she was sitting (and hopefully laying).*

Then two days later disaster struck. We found the nest damaged and empty, most likely the work of an Arctic Fox. A massive



blow for us, but stark evidence of the difficulties facing breeding birds in this place. Five days later came some consolation.

*Another sullen, cold day: some light rain but a persistent cold wind. Brian was outside monitoring the godwit pair across the slough – he had watched the female visit one of the male’s scrapes alone: so we did a stint monitoring them – they were up and down, often obscured behind the fish camp and tundra hummocks. Jan mentioned the slough was still crossable, so a decision was made to go and look at the scrapes, especially the one where the female had been seen sitting alone twice ... Brian stayed stationed with the scope to direct us, and Jan, Eddie and I set off across the slough.*

*We walked through the sedge and other vegetation in front of the church that I had only hitherto looked at, but where I had watched snipe, dowitchers, phalaropes, western sandpipers, dunlins, geese, and teal. .... On to the ice: an extraordinary experience. Initially I felt easy about it but then noticed the caution with which Eddie and Jan approached each section of ice, and given their experience, I fell into cautionary line! Big long sections of ice with varying cracks in between, some just centimetres wide, others up to a metre: but uneven width so there was always somewhere to cross. Some ice slabs tilted and rocked, and these were to be avoided, hence the caution.*

*Dark soft mud on the bank leading up to the sedge fields. Given the landmarks, particularly one single tall tuft of grass, we were able to walk almost directly towards the scrape area – good looking tundra from up close. With some gesturing from Brian, we closed in, and Eddie found it – a nest with one egg. We stayed several metres back and carried on past the area to avoid a there-and-back track. **But I have seen the nest of kuaka!** Not much cover around it and not much marking on the egg (surprising to Jan, and to Brian when he later saw the photos). So not particularly well camouflaged. But such a big egg – one of those things you read about and hear about – but nothing quite prepares you for that first encounter and the realisation that they are so big! Jan and I took photos and we retreated across the ice.*

Later I was privileged to contribute to ornithological history in recording re-nesting of Bar-tailed Godwits when the Boatshed Marsh pair laid a second clutch. Which I did get to see. 🐦

**HARSH COUNTRY:** (above) A brilliantly camouflaged male godwit sitting on a nest; below, top) the old church where Keith was based: (middle); a female godwit in the snow; (bottom) a nest with four beautiful eggs.



# What have our tracked godwits been up to lately?

The international godwit tracking programme involving PMNT has attracted huge interest. Adrian Riegen updates what the birds have been doing lately.

Since the report in the May issue of *PM News*, most of the young godwits we are following have refuelled at sites on the Yellow Sea and continued northwards.

As I write this I am looking at 18 flashing dots on a digital map of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. Each dot represents a young godwit with an active transmitter telling us where it is along the flyway. These are birds that hatched somewhere in the northern hemisphere around the end of June or early July 2019 so they are just celebrating their second hatchday.

We expected them to be scattered around the coast of New Zealand right now as they mature into adults over the next year or so. But what do we know? As godwits have taught us over and over again, it is best to keep an open mind when it comes to their lives, and this year is no exception.

The flashing dots tell us one bird is in Awarua Bay, Invercargill at the southern end of the flyway while another is close to the Arctic Ocean in Alaska at the northern end of the Flyway.

Five are now on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta in Western Alaska. Another is hanging out on the Korean Peninsula. Two more are residing near Qingdao on the Chinese side of the Yellow Sea; in June one of them went north to Vladivostok, Russia, and returned a couple of days later. Another has been in residence just east of Wewak, on the north coast of Papua New Guinea, since late March.

The rest are doing what we thought they would, just hanging out in New Zealand around the Nelson region, Foxton and Pūkoro Mirānda.

Last but not least is perhaps the most interesting one. 4RBBY has been in eastern Siberia since 28 May. It has made a few forays along the Arctic Ocean coast and at the moment is moving west from the most eastern part of Siberia (see map).

Was this one hatched in Siberia? In which case is it the *menzbieri* subspecies and we failed to recognise it when it was caught? Is it an Alaskan *baueri* that got lost when flying north? Or is it an *anadyrensis* subspecies from the Anadyr region of eastern Siberia? If this one returns to New Zealand its plumage will come under very close scrutiny. It could just be a



*baueri* that simply didn't make it all the way to Alaska this year.

The immature birds have rather hogged the limelight this year, but we shouldn't forget the adults, now also into the second year of tracking. As reported earlier, six adults still had active transmitters when they reached Alaska in May and as at 18 July all six were still working.

Three went to the North Slope, two to the Seward Peninsula and one stayed on the YKD. Sadly the two on the Seward left there after only 40 days so did not have time to breed successfully. Interestingly, a birder in Nome on the Seward Peninsula has been following the posts Ann Buckmaster and I put out and she has reported a late, heavy snow this year, making breeding difficult for a range of birds on the Peninsula. So their failure to breed successfully might have more to do with the weather than predators.

It was looking quite hopeful for the three nesting on the North Slope until 17 July when 4BYWW and 4BWWB packed their bags and headed straight for the

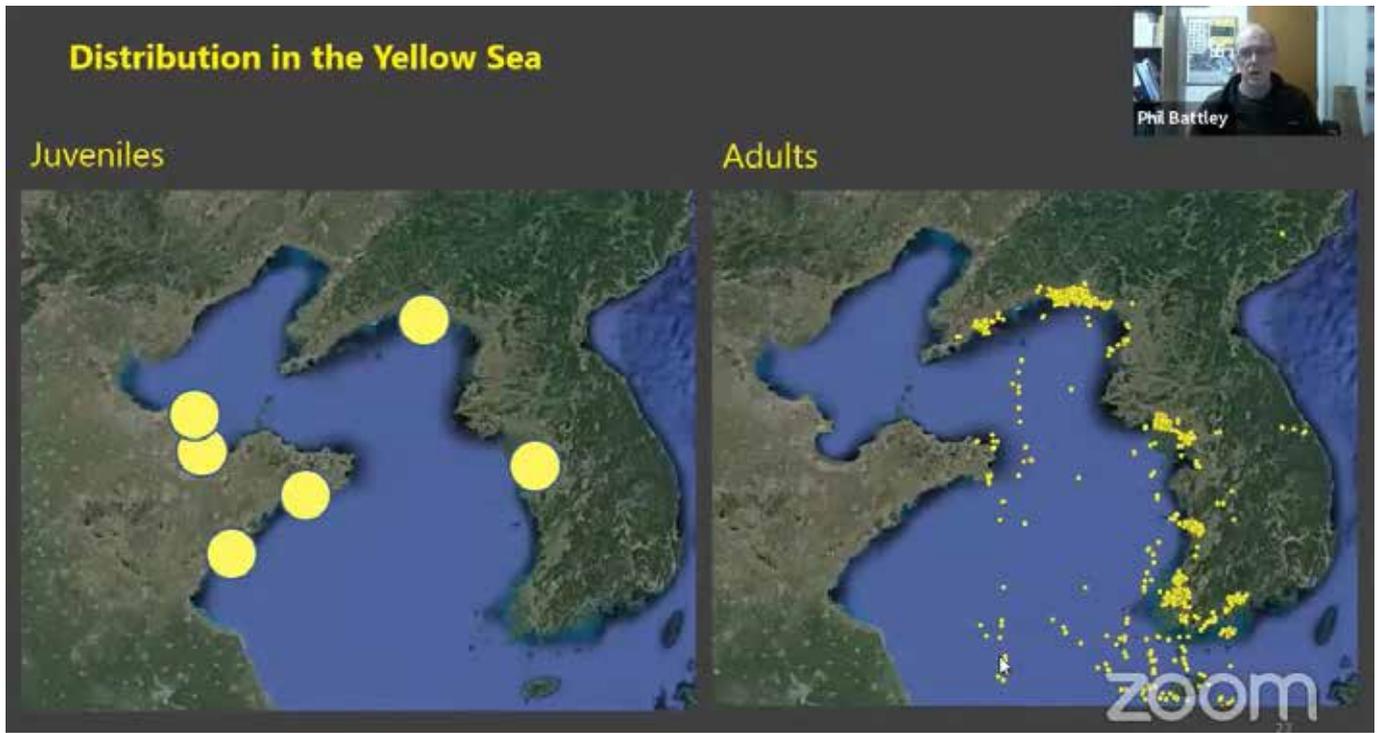
Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta after what is probably too short a time to breed.

Which leaves 4BBYB, still on the breeding ground after 63. Around 60 days is considered the minimum to breed successfully so fingers crossed 4BBYB has been successful.

The problem with this real time story is that the game keeps changing. Now all young birds that made it to Alaska are back on the YKD (the map shows the range of routes the young birds took to get to Alaska and Siberia).

Very soon the winter weather will return to Alaska and the godwits and vast numbers of other birds, from stints to cranes, will set off on flights to warmer climes.

We will be watching visually and digitally for godwits to arrive back in New Zealand once again and herald the start of the austral summer. Then it will be time for all of those with scopes and big camera lenses to get out there to look for flagged and colour-banded birds and share your observations. 🐦



GENERATION GAP: A Zoom slide by associate professor Phil Battley (pictured top right) shows the different between where juvenile and adult godwits roost on the Yellow Sea.

## Exciting new insights into our amazing godwits

A series of exciting fresh insights already provided by the Bar-tailed Godwit satellite tracking programme, have been outlined by associate professor Phil Battley, from Massey University, on a webinar organised by the East Asian-Australian Flyway Partnership.

For instance, the slides shown during webinar revealed that the more frequent positional reports provided by the new solar-powered tags being used have made it possible to learn more about the way migrating birds respond to adverse wind conditions.

In some cases, birds running into strong headwinds were shown to simply take advantage of the presence of islands like Okinawa or New Caledonia to land and wait a storm out.

In other cases, they basically went with the windflow – sometimes being blown well off course – and then corrected their course and headed for the original destination when it became possible.

In the instance of 4BBWY, for example, it was heading to Alaska when a low pressure centre forced it to overshoot by almost 1,500km, nearly as far as Canada, but when favourable winds arrived it was able to reach its breeding ground. ‘This,’ said Phil, ‘was clearly a bird whose map sense told it where it needed to go and it found a way to get there.’

One of the big surprises of the exercise has been the number of young godwits

now aged two that migrated from New Zealand back to the Arctic. ‘Beforehand we ran a sort of sweep on how many would migrate,’ said Phil, ‘and the expectation was 2-4. But in fact 13 did.’

The tracking has also provided new information on site use in the Yellow Sea. Most of the adult godwits went to the eastern side but most of the juveniles went to the west.

The latest findings also confirm that, probably because of the recently reported collapse in the food supply on the Yellow Sea, godwits are spending more time there, with young birds hanging around even longer than the adults. As a result some first-time migrants almost certainly migrated without Alaskan-breeding *baueri* subspecies adults to fly with and they tended to take much more westerly routes than adults did. One bird even settled in Russia for the northern summer.

One possible explanation for these Russian pathways is that the young birds instinctively took the shortest route, which is across Russia, while adults used a more easterly route which offers greater wind assistance.

Another is that these young birds ended up travelling with a different subspecies that migrates later than Alaskan birds and breeds in Russia. Also in the webinar Ginny Chan, from the animal ecology group at the University of Groningen, discussed tracking of Bar-tailed

Godwits from northwest Australia – assumed to be of the *menzbieri* subspecies of *Limosa lapponica*, which breeds in northern Siberia.

But a couple of the birds went further east, to the Anadyr River Basin in Chukotka, which is the breeding ground of the little known *anadyrensis* subspecies, thought to be genetically halfway between *baueri* and *menzbieri*.

Ginny added that observations in the subspecies breeding ground in Chukotka indicated that the population of this subspecies was at least 4,500.

It is unknown whether *menzbieri* or *anadyrensis* occur in New Zealand, though birds marked in New Zealand have been seen in Russia. Phil commented that the routes taken by godwits in our tracking project indicated that one which flew to Siberia could have migrated with *menzbieri*, while another created great interest when it stopped in Chukotka, home of *anadyrensis*, before carrying on to Alaska.

‘Perhaps,’ he said, ‘it shows how *menzbieri* and *baueri* could mix and create another species: *anadyrensis*.’

Overall, Phil said, the project had already produced some very exciting information. The team would continue to watch those birds whose tags were still working, the plan was already to tag more birds this November and to keep watching out for bands. 

# A godwit relationship to set your calendar by



Whanganui photographer Paul Gibson and the Bar-tailed Godwit with the AJD flag have been meeting like this for 13 years. When AJD makes his annual trip south from Alaska, Paul is always around to take a few photos and, most importantly, to say goodbye.

ONE OF the most remarkable stories about the bond between humans and Bar-tailed Godwits in New Zealand is that of the 13-year relationship between Whanganui birder Paul Gibson and the godwit bearing the engraved flag AJD.

The two first came together in 2009 when AJD was among a dozen or so godwits that turned up at the Whanganui Estuary where Paul does much of his birdwatching.

Since then AJD has flipped between Whanganui and the Manawatu Estuary at Foxton Beach but Paul has always managed to catch up with him and, most significantly, has always been around to see him depart.

Over the years Paul has amassed thousands of photos and masses of data about AJD and plans to do a book on him. "The title of the book will likely be *Feats beyond amazing: the life story of a Bar-tailed Godwit*."

This year, once again, Paul was there to see AJD leave and afterwards sent out this report, "This afternoon we witnessed our godwit AJD leaving again on migration, for the 13th time. It was a moving moment for me, to be close and see, hear

and photograph all that happened in those last 30 minutes.

"They had been doing their migratory calls for several hours, and in the last hour they bathed, drank water, preened, stretched their wings, moved about, and chatted constantly.

"AJD left 15 minutes later than last year - at 5:15 pm, but on the same day - March 25. There were just three in the group, two males and one female.

"They headed north-west and with a south-east wind behind them - just perfect. I even managed some clear pictures as he left the ground, with wings spread, probably not to touch land again until reaching the Yellow Sea, in about eight days time. Others were there with me to farewell the birds.

"We will now look for his return again in September. His resilience is an inspiration. But I realise that one year I am going to be disappointed. He will not live forever!"

As wader expert Adrian Riegen points out, Paul's work shows that it is possible to acquire valuable information about our amazing migratory birds without using expensive high-tech gear like

satellite transmitters, or even going to major wader sites like Pūkoro-roko Miranda.

"Only small numbers of godwits occur at Whanganui, but in some ways that helps," Adrian says, "and Paul has managed to capture the day and time to the minute that AJD has departed on northward migration for many years. He has found how consistent its departure dates are, with 25 March seeming to be its favourite day. How on earth does it know the date?"

"On 20 March this year I emailed Paul to see if AJD had departed. "Of course not," he said, "he will be leaving on 25 March." And sure enough, I got an email that evening saying AJD departed at 17:15, just 15 minutes later than its 2020 departure time.

Adrian emphasises that observations like Paul's are crucial to better understanding these birds and how important it is to keep places like Whanganui Estuary intact.

"I give many talks about godwits and other waders to community groups and so much of the story is made up from a myriad of small observations. Some-

DEPARTURE TIME: In the top photo below AJD seems to be asking his fellow godwits, 'Do you think it's time to leave?' While in the bottom photo you could almost imagine the two birds dreaming about the colourful tundra and tasty insects of Alaska. Photos / Paul Gibson



times people pass on observations to me saying "this probably isn't important" - and of its own maybe not - but adding to the bigger picture is often really valuable.

"The important message is, if you are making observations of tagged birds or bird behaviour that seems unusual to you, pass it on to someone who can hopefully make sense of it and add that piece to the great jigsaw puzzle.

"This is citizen science working at its finest and at a level a student studying for a Masters or PhD can't hope to emulate in the three or four years they have to achieve a result. Students often refer to observations from citizen scientists to help them better understand what they are studying.

"We hear all too often people saying, "I'm not a scientist", and yet they have a wealth of knowledge from years of careful and thoughtful observations.

"There must be thousands of notebooks out there full of little puzzle pieces just waiting to be added to the bigger picture. If you have some of those books, but don't know who to share them with, I'm sure the Pūkorokoro Miranda team can help." 





RECORDERS: (at left) Warren Smith 2885m up on the summit of Tapuae o Uenuku; (below) Barry Smith who 20 years on is still excited about seeing godwits up there.

## A new New Zealand record for high-flying godwits

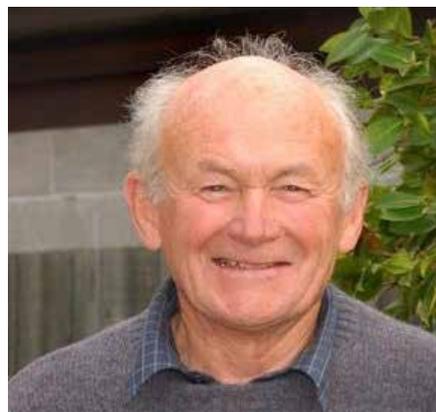
We now have a new record for the highest sighting of Bar-tailed Godwits in New Zealand: 2885m, flying north past the summit of Tapuae o Uenuku, the highest peak in the Inland Kaikoura Range.

That clearly surpasses the only other record of godwits at high altitude in New Zealand which came in 2006 when a climber found a dead bird lying on the snow at 2610m on Ruapehu. That was subsequently written up as a note in *Notornis* by Phil Battley and Chrys Horn, who deduced that from its appearance and the timing of the discovery that the bird had been on its southern migration from the Arctic when it died.

The latest sighting is not exactly new. It was made by now-retired scientist Barry Smith, a longstanding member of PMNT, while he was climbing Tapuae o Uenuku with his son Warren back on 13 March 1998.

In a blog posting written some 20 years later Barry noted: ‘The previous day we had slogged up the Hodder Valley – 50-something river crossings – and we’re now standing on the top of Tapuae o Uenuku . . . This day in early March 1998 was perfect; blue skies, no wind, and Warren and I were congratulating ourselves on our effort and tucking into some food and drink when it happened.

‘A glance to the south revealed a dark, fast-growing smudge. In a matter of seconds my eyes focused on it as it passed, heading northwards, passing about 20m from our perch on the summit. It was a peloton of godwits – about 20 of them – birds drafting at speed, packed together, beaks extended, wings pumping, working, eyes fixed on the northern horizon. In a matter of moments they were gone.



“Did you see that?” I exclaimed to Warren. “Yes – what were they?” They were godwits, and I was stunned and excited. I’d never dreamed of having a moment like this on a mountaintop.

‘Once, at 7am on the top of another high inland peak, I looked up to find a seagull hovering directly overhead. I’d once ridden with the Morochucos in Bolivia too. Special moments but nothing like this. This time – for a split second – it seemed like I’d flown with the godwits.

I’ve never forgotten that moment. A special moment in a good life. Moving.’

Beyond sending a copy of his blog post to the Shorebird Centre, Barry hadn’t ever done anything about that sighting. But a story (in *PM News 113*) about plans to fit newly developed pressure-sensitive tags to Bar-tailed Godwits, to find out how high they fly on migration between New Zealand and the Arctic, revived the excitement of that moment.

Barry sent a copy of his blog post to editor Jim Eagles, who forwarded it to Phil Battley at Massey University. Phil was very excited and he and Barry have written a note on the incident which earlier this year was published in the special shorebird issue of *Notornis*.

PMNT’s banding committee chair Adrian Riegen said it was ‘a very exciting story’ and great to have it shared. ‘Sightings of godwits in flight away from mudflats are very rare anywhere in the world, so much so that little gems like this become very valuable.’ 

## And a new record for oldest godwit as well

The Bar-tailed Godwit was one of 237 godwits banded on 18 December 1993. She was a second year bird and went unnoticed until 11 February 2008 when she was recaptured and fitted with the flag ASE during the early satellite tagging project. It has not been recorded in New Zealand since 2015 but was seen and photographed in the Brisbane region on 20 November last year at which time it was 28 years and three months old.

Adrian Riegen, who was involved in that banding, says that makes ASE the oldest recorded New Zealand godwit. ‘The sighting of her in Queensland was the first from there so we don’t know where she usually hangs out during the southern summer anymore’ he says. ‘She’s possibly still coming to New Zealand but not to Pūkoro. It is quite possible she is still migrating and stopped in Queensland on her way back to New Zealand last year as many others did.’ One more reason to keep eyes peeled for tagged birds 

# Tōrea ET phones home to help save the species

Birders are being asked to report South Island Pied Oystercatchers wearing brightly coloured flags as part of a broad-spectrum campaign to give the birds more protection, writes **Jim Eagles**

Unlike the ET in the smash hit film from 1982, the ET that Department of Conservation researcher Emma Williams is holding in her hands (in the photo at right) has no problem phoning home.

That's because this particular Tōrea, or South Island Pied Oystercatcher, is fitted with both a highly visible red flag, in this case with the initials ET, and a new generation tracking device, a sort of tiny solar-powered phone with a GPS app, designed to talk to an app on Emma's mobile.

In fact when I made a joke about calling home she promptly got out her phone, said 'Let's see if I've had a call,' punched a couple of buttons and added, 'Yep, ET's already got in touch and reported where he or she is.'

It's all part of a joint project between DOC, Manaaki Whenua/Landcare Research, Birds NZ and the Pūkorokoro Miranda Naturalists' Trust, to find out more about New Zealand's internal migrant waders in order to provide them with better protection.

The Tōrea, which breed in riverbeds and farmland in the South Island and then, in late December, fly in their thousands up to warmer places like the Firth of Thames, have been chosen as the focus species for the first stage of the exercise.

Like most other internal migrants, Tōrea numbers are declining but, as Anne Schlesselmann from Manaaki Whenua points out, 'Their impressive mobility makes conservation management challenging because they encounter diverse threats throughout their annual migratory cycles, including while they are on the move and in coastal wintering grounds.'

Aiming to identify and reduce those threats, the project got underway last year at a Tōrea breeding area on riverbed and farmland in the upper Rangitata Valley which is already the subject of landscape-level predator control. Researchers deployed cameras to record the number of predators as part of a programme aimed at finding out what level of predator control in nesting areas is necessary for successful breeding. Future research



will involve a mix of nesting sites which do or do not have predator control in order to compare the breeding outcomes.

Also at the Rangitata, tracking tags were fitted to 32 adult and fledgling birds as the first step in identifying their internal migration routes and stopover sites. In addition, high visibility flags were put on more Tōrea with the aim of having them spotted and recorded by bird-watchers along the migration routes and on the wintering grounds.

Initial results have indicated a high level of breeding success by the Rangitata Tōrea and birds have since been tracked dispersing to many parts of the country including the Firth of Thames.

Emma, who is leading the DOC research effort, says, 'So far, two national routes have emerged as common flight

paths for Tōrea: a northern route along the Southern Alps/up the western Waikato coastline, and a southern route down the eastern side of the South Island.

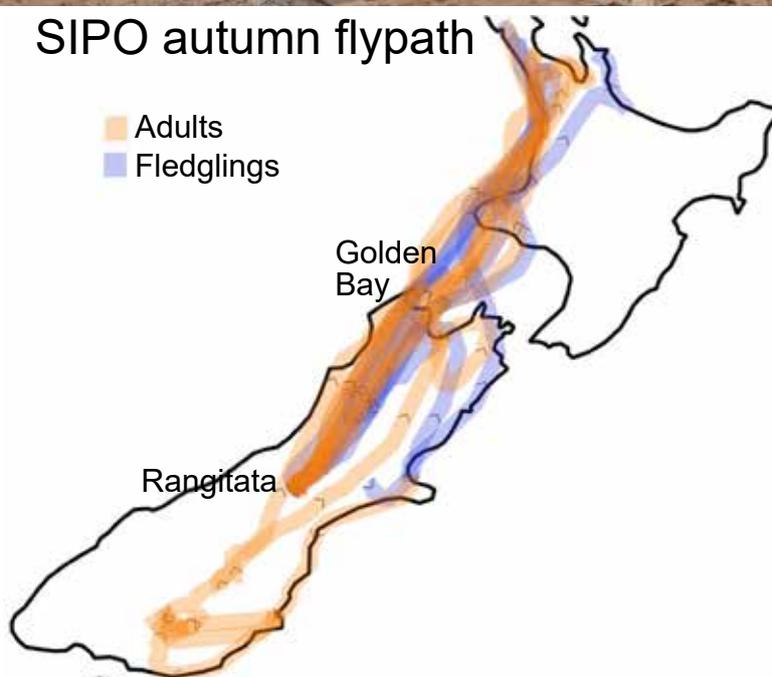
'We've also been able to identify regional site networks and hotspots for less mobile non-breeders, as well as tagging fledglings to show juvenile migration patterns that remain independent from adults.'

Meanwhile, many more flags and tracking tags have been deployed by various groups around the country. During the annual PM Field Course, for instance, there was a catch of 110 Tōrea, many of which were fitted with the new red tags.

Then in early June, in conjunction with the Birds NZ conference in Thames, a team of DOC officers joined Shorebird Centre volunteers to catch some of the thousands of Tōrea holidaying nearby.



## SIPO autumn flypath



KURANUI BAY: (this page from top)  
Walking the net into position.

The cannon fires and birds and banders fly

Racing to get the birds out of the net.

Map by Sam Krouse of DOC showing the path taken by birds from Rangitata, plus three from Golden Bay, this autumn.

(opposite page from top)

Scores of oystercatchers look on with equanimity as four teams of banders fit flags and tags to their friends.

Lucy Dean releases a flagged oystercatcher.



After something of a false start, when birds were disrupted by walkers and dogs, 115 Tōrea plus 11 Variable Oystercatchers were caught at Kuranui Bay just north of Thames. They were all banded, the Tōrea were also fitted with the new bright red flags, and in addition 22 of them got the new tracking tags.

Among them was the ET tag. It was originally intended to be deployed during the field course but, after a jocular conversation with Jim Eagles about phoning home, chief bander Adrian Riegen decided to keep it for use on a bird with a tracking tag in the hope it might attract extra attention. This it did, providing a headline for a story about the tracking project in the Thames Valley newspaper *Valley Profile* ... and for this article.

A key part of the SIPO research is a citizen science exercise, intended to involve members of PMNT, Birds NZ and other birdwatchers, reporting sightings of the flags, which have been colour-coded to show where they were put on.

The ones from the North Island are red, yellow is Nelson/Golden Bay and the rest of the South Island is blue, Orange are breeders or fledglings from the Rangitata, and Green will be breeders or fledglings from the Rakaia. In general, if the flag has two letters or numbers, the bird was marked as a chick, and if there are three, it was probably marked as an adult.

Anyone who does see a coloured tag on an oystercatcher is asked to record the colour and the letters and advise DOC at [bandingoffice@doc.govt.nz](mailto:bandingoffice@doc.govt.nz) or ring the Shorebird Centre at 09 232 2781.

## 10-year-old Lucy's great birding adventure



YOUNG BIRDER: 10-year-old Lucy Dean releases a SIPO after it has been processed. Lucy travelled down from Auckland with her mother to watch the catching and was thrilled to be asked to take part. This is her story:

As the cannon net fired over a flock of South Island Pied and Variable Oystercatchers, the team of around 25 DOC workers and volunteers quickly ran to the birds. My mum and I came not long after them, and I was enthralled by the amount of feathered friends. I really couldn't believe it. I was being asked to pick up an oystercatcher for the first time! I carefully held the wing and gently freed the dainty head from the orange net. As soon as a box of six was delicately moved by my eager Mum, I heard my name being called by Adrian. I continued my work until all the Tōrea were safely secured in their boxes. It was all go at Kuranui Bay as four groups gathered around separate set-ups. The birds were banded, measured, weighed, aged and finally released, which I was in charge of. I felt more than satisfied as the alert birds flew over the calm bay. Overall we banded 115 SIPO and 11 VOCs. We also caught one bird that already had a band from Pūkorokoro Miranda Shorebird Centre in January! There were also 22 fitted with transmitters to help find where these special birds are breeding and travelling. I'm ever so grateful to be able to come to this heart-warming event. There were so many kind and inclusive people. I felt honoured to be able to join in with the things I did.



DEFENDERS: Airforces of (at left) Black-fronted Terns and (at right) Pied Stilts chase Harriers away from colonies of Black-Billed Gulls. Photos / Grant Davey

## Airforces of Black-fronted Terns and Pied Stilts join the Caspian Tern police in protecting endangered species

The feature on Caspian Terns in *PM120* obviously created a lot of interest. Gwenda Pulham's story about Caspian Tern police protecting Fairy Terns from attacks by Black-backed Gulls inspired a report of airforces of Black-fronted Terns and Pied Stilts doing a similar job down south. And the report that the Caspian Tern colony on Ohiwa Harbour disappeared 30 years ago brought news that the colony is flourishing today.

Grant Davey from the Ashley Rakahuri Rivercare Group was fascinated to read about the good work being done by Caspian Tern police up north and keen to report on airforces set up in his area by the Black-fronted Terns and Pied Stilts to help the endangered Black-billed Gulls (BBG).

Grant says he started thinking about this two seasons ago after checking out two BBG colonies on the river which had very different experiences with Harrier predation.

On the riverbank near one colony of 1,547 nests he found the remains of 116 fledgling Black-billed Gulls where they had been taken by Harriers to eat. Near the other colony, of 485 nests, he found only three fledgling remains. 'At the time I couldn't understand what the difference could have been.'

Then last season there was a colony of 1,278 BBG and only about 10 deaths attributable to Harriers. Why?

Grant is now 'pretty sure, though with no real hard evidence, that what was

sometimes protecting the gulls was two air forces of Pied Stilts and Black-fronted Terns.'

Thinking back, he reckons that on the island with 1,547 BBG nests 'there were only two stilt nests and they had gone by the time the BBGs fledged. There were also 48 tern nests, but they had also gone by BBG fledgling time, from what I can work out wiped out by Norway Rats.'

By contrast, near the 485 BBG nest colony 'there were quite a number of stilts nesting close by and a small colony, only half a dozen nests, of Black-fronted Terns about 200m away.'

Could it have been the presence of stilts and terns that made the difference? Grant thinks so because in the latest season 'there were a large number of stilts nesting on the BBG colony island . . . sometimes there were approaching 100 birds in the area. There were also around a dozen Black-front Tern nests on the island.'

Those stilts and terns were definitely still there during BBG fledging, Grant says. 'On several occasions I observed

Pied Stilt and/or Black-fronted Tern fighters being scrambled when Harriers came within a few hundred metres of the island, sometimes at a height of at least 100m.'

To prove the point he took photos of terns and stilts harassing the Harriers.

By contrast, it was only when a Harrier got really close to the colony that the BBG adults raised into the air, and if the Harrier swooped down on the colony it would get chased. But by then it was sometimes too late.

'I did record a couple of times where a gull had chased a Harrier some distance from the colony,' says Grant. 'But it was definitely more commonly by terns or stilts.'

So it seems as though the improved survival rate of BBG fledglings could be the result of the early-warning defensive screen provided by the terns and stilts.

'We did put out a couple of scarecrows this season,' he says, 'but I doubt that they are the only reason for the lack of Harrier attacks.'



STILL GOING: Caspian Terns and chicks on a shellbank in Ohiwa Harbour.

Photos / Mike Collins

## Caspian Terns thrive in Ohiwa Harbour

The Caspian Tern colony on the Ohiwa Harbour, which was reported to have disappeared some 30 years ago, is now flourishing with 26 chicks having fledged last season.

After reading of the colony's purported demise, Meg and Mike Collins, who are co-convenors of the Ohiwa Reserves Care Group, sent a cheerful note advising, 'We have good news. The Ohiwa colony is flourishing and it is far from being abandoned.'

'It has been viable since our care group started actively managing it in 2008. Our most recent count in 2020-21 recorded 47 adults, who laid 35 eggs and fledged 26 chicks.'

The colony in Ohiwa Harbour is on a small shellbank just off Uretara Island in the Ohiwa Harbour.

Meg says that when they began active management in 2008, 'the Black-backed Gulls who nested at the other end of the shellbank were the major threat. They continually hassle the other nesting birds especially during the breeding season.'

'For the first two years we just pricked their eggs, but this proved unsatisfactory as the eggs started to decay, and the gulls laid again. So for the next 11 years we pricked the eggs with 1mm of formalin, which preserved the eggs and the gulls just sat on the nest for the rest of the season.'

'Then last season we tried smashing

the eggs and destroying the nests. This proved very effective, as we only had to do it twice at three-week intervals during November/December. We hoped that destroying the nests will persuade the gulls not to nest in this area.'

The other threats to nesting birds on the shellbank, Meg says, are rats and weeds. 'Only one rat has ever been recorded. We put out rat bait and no rats have been seen since.'

'One year we had Fathen which grew to 2m high. If required we clear the shellbank of weeds as the shorebirds prefer open places to nest.'

Since starting its work in 2008, the

group has recorded 218 chicks successfully fledging on the shellbank and 726 Black-backed Gull eggs have been destroyed.

As well as the Caspian Terns the shellbank has been home to occasional colonies of Red-billed Gulls, Whit-fronted Terns and a handful of Variable Oystercatchers and NZ Dotterels.

The Ohiwa care group has never found any other Caspian Tern colonies around the harbour or any lone nesting birds.

Once fledged, Meg reports, 'the Caspian Terns spread out throughout the Eastern Bay of Plenty from Hicks Bay to Ohope.' 



GOOD NEWS: Meg Collins records details of the Ohiwa colony.



UNEXPECTED VISITORS: Two Black-fronted Dotterel seemed to revel in the attention they got after arriving on Widgery Lake a few minutes before PMNT's AGM. Photos / Jim Eagles

## Pretty little birds take the spotlight at AGM

The last minute arrival of two visiting Black-fronted Dotterels delayed the start of PMNT's AGM as members, including **Jim Eagles**, enjoyed the chance of a close-up view of these attractive and quite rare waders.

The star attraction at this year's AGM of PMNT may for once not have been the excellent guest speaker or the report of a hugely impressive year of activity from chair Will Perry. Instead it appeared to be the arrival of a pair of Black-fronted Dotterel (*Charadrius melanops*) which landed on the shore of Widgery Lake just as the meeting was about to start.

Members rushed outside with binoculars and cameras and watched delightedly as these two quite rare visitors performed around the shores of the pond. In the end everyone had to be ordered inside so proceedings could get underway.

Manager Keith Woodley said in his 28 years at the Centre he could recall only four or five appearances of Black-fronted Dotterels. 'There was a dotterel on the lake last year around the same time which stayed a couple of days. It was briefly joined by a second bird.

'An earlier encounter was an immature bird that landed briefly on the driveway and lingered just long enough to tease me into reaching for the camera before it scarpered.'

They are striking little birds – NZ Birds Online describes them as 'dainty' – with their black eye-band and y-shaped chest plumage contrasting sharply with the white underparts, while the crown and back are light brown. The beak is a vivid red with a black tip and the eye-ring is also red. The sexes have similar plumage and there is no seasonal variation so the two that visited us must have been an adult and a juvenile.

Black-fronted Dotterels generally hang around fresh water, being found on rivers, ponds, lagoons, sewage ponds and estuaries, and feed on a mix of small invertebrates and seeds.

However, they clearly don't like salt

water, so are not found on the coast itself, hence this visiting pair heading for Widgery Lake rather than the adjacent shores of the Firth of Thames. That allows them to avoid competition from their bigger cousins, the Banded and New Zealand Dotterels.

Black-fronted Dotterels seem to have self-introduced from Australia in the 1950s. In a delightful account of their discovery, published in *Notornis* in 1962, Norman B Mackenzie said the first report of them in New Zealand was by DH Brathwaite at the Ahuriri Lagoon, Napier, in 1954. This was followed by further sightings at Longburn in the Manawatu and in Canterbury, then a bird was again seen on the Ahuriri Lagoon all within a few days.

There were no further reports, Mackenzie wrote, until, 'In 1958 Brathwaite saw three birds at Lake Hurimoana, near



**CLICK-BAIT:** An adult Black-fronted Dotterel in full plumage struts across the background of reflected plants to the joy of the assembled photographers.

Fernhill, about eight miles west of Hastings. Brathwaite and myself watched this flock throughout the winter months of 1958 by which time it increased to five. The colony then disappeared.

‘In August, 1961, a farmer at Fernhill, about three miles from Hurimoana, reported some unusual birds on a small marshy area on his farm. I found them very elusive, however, as it took several visits before I actually saw two adults . . . and identified them as Black-fronted Dotterels. This marsh dried up within a week and the flock again disappeared. Now that I realised the flock had survived I began a systematic search of the likely areas.’

The area was marshy and difficult to access, he says, so ‘It was not until 11 December that year, while searching the Tutae-kuri riverbed that I found two birds, one of which was a juvenile.

‘Further search in this area has disclosed at least six adults and nine juveniles, while on 2 January 1962 a nest containing one egg was discovered. This was found by Mr KW Varney and myself on

top of a slight ridge on an extensive open shinglebed, about 20 yards from water. It was lined with small stones about the size of a matchhead together with a few dried grass stems.

‘The nest was discovered as a result of noticing this particular bird displaying in an unusual manner, namely, walking slowly away from us, then squatting down, drooping the wings and spreading the tail so that the white outer feathers were conspicuously showing.

‘The bird was kept occupied by KWV while I retired about 200 yards to set up the telescope and from this position we both watched the bird make its way through the stones, stop, apparently turn an egg with the beak and settle down. This egg was later found to be infertile and has been sent to the Dominion Museum. . .

‘Further searching in the Ngaruro-ro river has led to the discovery of seven birds, all adults, only two of which appear to be mated. No young have yet been seen in this area. . .

‘At what we call the Willow nesting

area, short, twice daily observations for 10 days, disclosed only the two adults with two fledglings. However, on the 9 January 1962 both HD Hankins and myself were present for over three hours and it was not until the last few minutes that we discovered that there were four young. This fact in itself is apparently unusual in that [several Australian references] state that three eggs form a normal clutch.

‘We have so far located 13 adults and nine juveniles, the latter belonging to three family groups, and consider that at least two pairs are nesting again. It seems most likely that more will eventually be found.’

Since then Black-fronted Dotterel have gradually spread across the country, mainly on the east coast and in Manawatu, but are still officially classified as naturally uncommon natives. The population is estimated at a bit less than 3,000.

It’s nice to know that at least a couple of them have got to within striking distance of the Shorebird Centre. 



RESTORING FINDLAY RESERVE: Ray Buckmaster (centre) leads another massive planting effort. Photo / Jim Eagles

## 1000 volunteer hours add 10,000 more plants

Another fantastic effort by around 70 volunteers – and an estimated 1050 hours of voluntary work - has seen 10,000 more plants put on the Findlay Reserve as the second major step in PMNT’s longterm restoration project.

This follows last year’s planting of around 11,000 plants, of which project coordinator Ray Buckmaster estimates some 70% have survived, with at least five species already producing seed. Monitoring those plants allowed Ray to modify the planting plan to increase the likelihood of survival.

This year’s effort involved 17 species, with the most frequently used being Knobby Club Rush, *Plagianthus*, *Coprosma propinqua*, *Muehlenbeckia*, *Umbrella Sedge*, *Flax* and *Speargrass*.

Of those, 4,000 were jointly raised at the PMNT nursery on the grounds of Annie and Sean Wilson’s Miranda Farm Café and Gallery and by three other volunteer growers. Between them, Diane John from the Wairarapa, and more locally, Jeanette and Hector Sutherland and Barbara Smith raised nearly a thousand plants. They joined Ray, and Ann and a changing cast of supporters to plant all 4,000 in the weeks before the planting weekend.

For the weekend 4800 more plants came from the Te Whangai Trust nursery at Miranda and 850 from Warwick and Krishna Buckman’s HELP (Habitat Enhancement and Landcare Partnership Trust) nursery in Waihi.

To make sure they were all able to be planted Ray and Ann, plus a day of contract drilling from HELP and core supporters produced enough planting holes for those plants to be placed alongside for the next day’s planting.

On the Saturday, more than 40 volunteers – by no means all birding people – turned up and had a highly enjoyable time chatting, joking and putting plants in the ground.

Much of the planting was completed on the Saturday morning, as planned, after which everyone moved back to the Centre for homemade soup and bread. A few enthusiastic helpers, knowing that heavy rain was promised for the next day, went back to the reserve in the afternoon to lessen the burden for the planters coming next day. On the Sunday, 20 volunteers worked in the rain to finish the planting and by mid-morning they were back in the Centre drying off and ready for a hot meal.

The funding for equipment and plants over the past two seasons has mainly come from the Department of Conservation’s Community Fund but it has not opened for applications as it usually would. However, even if it stays that way, Ray says PMNT will still be able to do substantial planting. ‘At the moment we have 1,500 plants in our nursery with a further 1,250 oioi and other species that require two years to reach a good size being grown for us by HELP. We have dou-

bled production from our growers and nursery this year and it is possible that we could increase further. So, without further grant money, we could have a total around 6-7,000 plants for 2022.’

To ensure there is sufficient funding to buy more plants if necessary the Council has agreed to provide a \$4,000 float which, as Ray put it, ‘I’ll try not to spend but can use if I have to.’

The Council has also agreed to gratefully take up offers by some farmer members to upgrade the vehicle track from the car park to the Stilt Hide, which became almost impassable after prolonged use by vehicles carrying plants and gear during this winter’s planting, by levelling the ground and spreading it with rotten rock.

The plan for next year is to focus on the fringes of the Stilt Pond. The aim is to use a commercial operator to spray both the eastern edge of the pond, from the area already planted all the way to the reserve car park, and the entire western edge, namely the narrow strip alongside the road, to remove invasive plants like *Fennel*, *Carex divisa* and *Kikuyu*.

In addition, the areas where few plants from 2020 survived could be replanted with more suitable species. Also, trial plantings of Coastal Spear Grass from the Trust’s nursery, which have been carried out near the boardwalk to the Godwit Hide, could be expanded into the more challenging areas for plant survival. 🐦



PLANTING PHOTOS by Tony Green, Wendy Hare, Chelsea Ralls and Jim Eagles.





WHERE'S THE OWNER? A dog chasing birds at Kakamatua Inlet.

Photo / Jacqui Geux

## Finding a balance between dogs and birds sharing beaches

**James Russell** reports on a study aimed at starting the process of collecting data on the impact dogs on beaches have on shorebirds and finds the one thing that is clear is that dog regulations are not being followed.

The highly productive coastal environment at the interface of land and sea attracts many species, many of which are exclusively found in this narrow strip of habitat. Humans with their pets and vehicles are also attracted to this habitat – to live, make livelihoods and recreate – which brings them into conflict with the species naturally found in there.

One of the most upsetting sights to a shorebird enthusiast can be that of a dog disturbing birds going about their natural behaviours. Overseas dogs are considered out of place on beaches. New Zealand is an outlier where it is considered acceptable to take a dog to a beach. But whether the presence of dogs has any impact on the number of birds remains unknown as no New Zealand data actually exist on this question.

Anataia van Leeuwen researched this question as part of her 8-week University of Auckland summer scholarship last year. She spent a total of 96 hours counting birds, people and dogs on the West Auckland beaches of Anawhata, Te Henga, Piha and Karekare. Counts were undertaken 7am to 5pm, in 2-hour blocks, at random times of week, weekend and public holidays, in dog prohibited, on-leash and off-leash areas of beaches.

The results were clear, but also complex. The number of birds roosting on the beach but not flying were lower when dogs were present. But, the number of dogs also correlated with the number of people on the beach. Furthermore, even

with no dogs or people there may have been no birds. The number of birds on the beach isn't regulated just by the number of people or dogs, and the effect of high numbers of people and dogs cannot be easily separated. Furthermore, at medium-number of people (about 60) there was a 'fish and chips effect' where the number of gulls increased. However, compared to gulls, other species such as oystercatchers, dotterels and terns were more sensitive to disturbance.

Determining whether dogs absent, on- or off-leash affects the number of birds on beaches is further made difficult because not all beaches are created equal. For example the types of beaches that are easily accessible by humans and their dogs are also those that are closer to lagoons, making it difficult to tease apart habitat from human effects without a proper before-after study of changes in dog regulations. What is clear is that birds, humans recreating, and humans walking their dogs all occur at different times of day but, again, this may just be innately behavioural rather than causal.

Three quarters of dog counts were off-leash, 60% of these illegally, and 20% of dog counts were 'uncontrolled', while 10% were in prohibited areas. Dog regulations are clearly not being adhered to.

However, what remains unclear is how much dog disturbance actually impacts a bird's natural behaviours. Disturbed birds were observed flying off to nearby rocks before returning once the

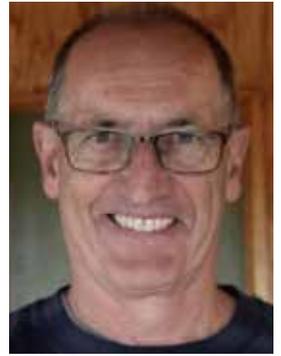
disturbance had passed. Whether such behaviour has long-term consequences for birds remains unknown, but warrants further investigation.

The results of this study have been useful for helping shape the future research required. Rather than focusing on a single threat, protection of coastal shorebirds needs to focus on identifying and ranking all on- and off-site threats. Other on-site threats to shorebirds include vehicles, and the clearing of beach wreck (eg driftwood and seaweed) which provide critical habitat enrichment.

Without causal data on the impacts of dog disturbance on birds, the issue is currently a human-human conflict, pitting the desires of those who wish to take their dogs on beaches against those who wish birds to be left undisturbed. It is important to transform this issue from a polarising clash between rival human interest groups into one about shared interests in protecting birds while allowing access by responsible dog owners.

Some bird enthusiasts are responsible dog owners and many dog owners also care about shorebirds. These are not two mutually exclusive groups. Those walking their dogs on beaches tend to be locals and cannot easily walk their dogs elsewhere. What is important is to target those dog owners with irresponsible behaviours, and the best people to help do this are other responsible dog owners who can set the standard and call-out bad behaviour. 

# What do we discuss at PMNT Council meetings?



Chair **William Perry** outlines the many complex issues affecting the Trust – from finances and membership to land and buildings – which come up for consideration at a typical Council meeting.

Many thanks to the membership of Pūkorokoro Miranda Naturalists' Trust (PMNT) for re-electing the existing members of PMNT Council at the Annual General Meeting.

As I write this report, we are approaching our first Council meeting since the AGM and, by the time you read it, the meeting will have happened.

One of the first tasks for this meeting is the election of Chairperson. In PMNT we do not elect a Chair at our Annual General Meetings; instead the Chair is chosen from the 10 elected members of the Executive Council. I expect to be re-elected, but you never really know until the day.

Once that detail is sorted, we get down to the business of the meeting. The agenda is pretty standard: Apologies, Minutes of the last meeting, Matters Arising, Financial Report, Manager's Report, Sub-committee reports. But buried in that list, implicit in the agenda, are many issues and activities that matter deeply to us on the Council and to you as members of the Trust.

As an example, we shall discuss the Manager's Roost at this Council meeting. Thanks to the generosity of our membership, we have raised sufficient funds to purchase a modern building to replace the existing structure, which has definitely passed its use-by date. We expect to start work soon on the implementation of this project and we hope to see the new structure in place by the end of the year. Maybe. We just have to deal with a few details.

Money is always part of the discussion at these meetings. The Financial Report is just one aspect of it, and we are always thinking about how to raise funds for specific projects: how to spend on routine maintenance; how much to spend; can we afford it; can we afford not to spend it?

One of the features of the current Council is the sub-committee structure. These sub-committees feature between



**VOLUNTEERS:** Ray and Ann Buckmaster raising plants.

two and four members of the PMNT Council and report to each meeting and, in some cases, between meetings. Banding and Flyway issues, Buildings, Land, Publicity, Membership – these are all covered by groups of us on PMNT Council.

Land is an example of something that has become more complex for PMNT. We now own the Robert Findlay Reserve and the 11-hectare grazing block across the road in addition to the parcel of land that accommodates the Shorebird Centre.

With this ownership we are aware that we have responsibilities as kaitiaki o te whenua. We may think of this as 'conservation' but what does that mean? The word 'conservation' suggests keeping it the same, preserving it as it is, preventing depletion or wastage.

By contrast, we do not really want to keep things as they are on our land; instead, we want to improve the land so that it is more suitable for the birds, to restore the land to its former glory, to its more natural condition. That is why many of you have helped with the plantings on the Robert Findlay Reserve.

This is the initiative of Ann and Ray Buckmaster and they have devoted many hours already to this project. You see

them on the volunteer planting days, but they are there doing this work at many other times before and after the Working Bees. We have thanked them before for this work, but we can't really thank them enough. One day we shall probably have to employ somebody to do what Ann and Ray have been doing and, in the meantime, they are doing it entirely as volunteers.

The 11-ha grazing block is owned by PMNT thanks to a grant from the Nature Heritage Fund. It is currently used for grazing and will remain so for the time being. We need to consider our long-term objective for this piece of land.

The other bit of land that concerns us is the TRkP block, owned not by PMNT but by a conglomerate of organisations that includes PMNT, Western Firth Catchment Group, Ngāti Paoa, Ecoquest and others. We have a stake in this whenua, and we are part of the process that decides its destiny, most likely to be a salt-water wetland but that remains to be seen. Watch this space.

In the meantime, I shall hope to see you at the Welcome to the Birds open day on 10 October, if not before or soon thereafter, God and Covid-willing.

**William Perry**

# GODWIT TIMES

with Emma Salmon

Tēnā koutou

Welcome back to the Godwit Times!

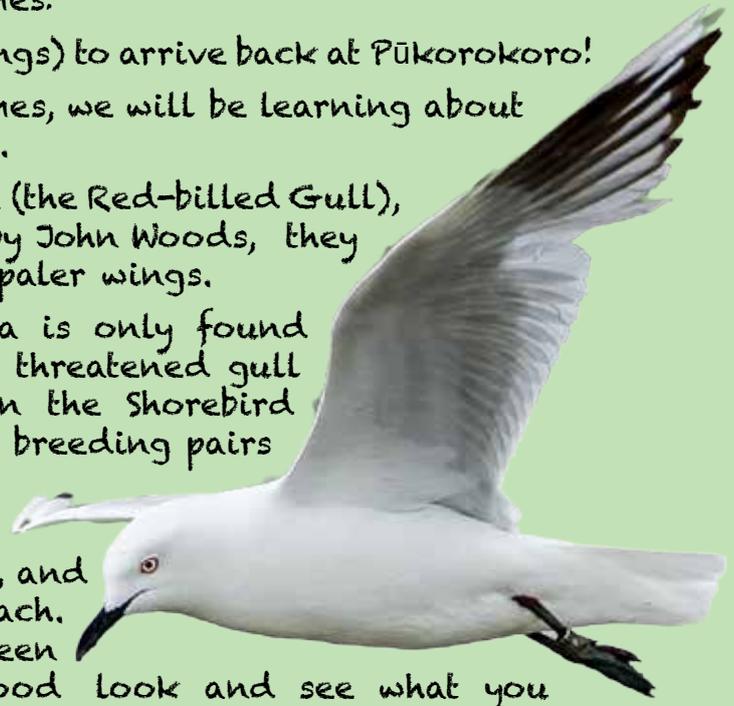
It's almost time for my teina (siblings) to arrive back at Pūkorokoro!

In this edition of the Godwit Times, we will be learning about Tārapuka (the Black-billed Gull).

Tārapuka are similar to Tārapunga (the Red-billed Gull), but, as you can see in this photo by John Woods, they have long, thin black beaks and paler wings.

Did you know that the Tārapuka is only found in New Zealand and is the most threatened gull species in the world! Just down the Shorebird Coast from Pūkorokoro over 100 breeding pairs were spotted in 2018! Wow!

Now my godwit-lovers, do I have a challenge for you. Head outside, and stand near a tree, a river, a beach. It can be a place you've often been or or somewhere new. Have a good look and see what you can find. Are there spiders, worms, birds, beetles? Make a list and send it in. I would also love you to send me a wee poem, story or a picture of your adventures to [godfreygodwit@shorebirds.org.nz](mailto:godfreygodwit@shorebirds.org.nz). Your adventure could be in the next Godwit Times!



Ngā mihi  
Godfrey

See the Wordfinder below. Find all the words on the list and you will see a hidden message.

S	S	U	N	A	M	S	A	T	L	B	P	H	R	U
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- AshburtonRiver
- BraidedRivers
- Canterbury
- Dams
- Farmland
- Insects
- KaiparaHarbour
- Marlborough
- OretiRiver
- Otago
- Ports
- Sandspits
- Southland
- Tasman
- WestCoast
- Whitebait

# Pūkoro-roko Miranda Naturalists' Trust



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Council members: Gillian Vaughan  
(Immediate Past Chair), David  
Lawrie, Wendy Hare, Bruce  
Postill, Trudy Lane, Ann and Ray  
Buckmaster, Jim Eagles.

## Magazine

Pūkoro-roko Miranda Naturalists' Trust publishes *Pūkoro-roko Miranda News* four times a year, in print and digital editions, 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.

Editor: Jim Eagles  
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## See the birds

Situated on the Firth of Thames between Kaiāua and the Miranda Hot Pools, the Pūkoro-roko 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.

## Budget accommodation

The Shorebird Centre has bunkrooms for hire and two self-contained units: Bunks cost \$20 per night for members and \$35 for non-members. Self-contained units are \$90 for members and \$135 for non-members. For further information contact the Shorebird Centre.

## Become a member

Membership of the Trust costs \$50 a year for individuals, \$60 for families and \$75 for those living overseas. Life memberships are \$2500 for those under 65 and \$1000 for those 65 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.

You can join at the Centre, pay via our webpage ([www.shorebirds.org.nz](http://www.shorebirds.org.nz)), by direct credit to bank account 02-0290-0056853-00 or call the Centre with your credit card details. Contact admin@shorebirds.org.nz for further information.

## Bequests

Remember the Pūkoro-roko Miranda Naturalists' Trust in your will and assist its vital work for migratory shorebirds. For further information contact the Shorebird Centre.

## Become a Volunteer

There's always a need for volunteers to do a variety of jobs including helping in the shop, guiding school groups, meeting visitors at the hide, working in the Centre garden, joining in the restoration project at the Findlay Reserve, helping with the Shorebird Census and lots more. If you're interested chat with the team at the Centre to see what will best suit you.

PMNT's work is made possible by the generous support of our sponsors



Ron & Edna  
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# Our Shorebird Calendar is back for 2022

- Stunning photos of our favourite birds
- All the information you need to make the most of a visit to the Shorebird Centre
- A big calendar block with lots of room for notes
- High tides for Pūkoro and the dates of our events during the year.

**Only \$15 (plus \$5 post if required)**




**August 2022**

Poikilotherms (Shorebirds) sense temperature a lot & it fluctuates with tide of high tide. Check the information about high tides and neap tides on the back cover of your calendar.

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31	1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11

Pūkoro and Miranda Shorebird Centre  
283 East Coast Road, Miranda

09 232 2781  
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shorebirds.org.nz  
MirandaShorebirdCentre



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**Ring 09 232 2781 and chat to our friendly team**

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**Or have an outing to Pūkoro, see the birds and call in at the**

**Shorebird Centre shop which is open for business every day except Christmas Day.**