

The Wrybill

Newsletter of the Canterbury Region, Ornithological Society of New Zealand

Regional representative: Jan Walker, 305 Kennedys
Bush Road, Christchurch 8025. Ph 03 322 7187.

Email: shesagreen@gmail.com



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Droppings from the RR by Jan Walker

For this August issue of The Wrybill it is strange but true to report that Spring is already here, though I wonder whether it will turn around and deliver snow next week. Already there are plovers nesting all over the place, a pied oystercatcher was making a scrape and a magpie was collecting nesting wool in a paddock. Earlier in the week a blackbird flew by with a beakful of fibre and the bellbirds round here are madly chasing each other through the branches.

Meanwhile the satellite-tracked godwits in Alaska, having finished their activities on the breeding grounds, are collecting at intertidal habitats near Cape Avinof on the southern Yukon Delta. This is a favourite staging site for refuelling before the journey south in September. Apparently the transmitters aren't expected to last until then but we hope some of the birds will be recorded by their tags when they return. There are only birds from Golden Bay and Firth of Thames involved in this project so we are unlikely to see them in Canterbury, but our birds will be doing exactly the same things.

Earlier in the year, about 2 months ago now, I visited New Plymouth for the OSNZ annual Conference. Mt Taranaki had not had any new snow on June 1st, the latest onset of winter there for over 50 years. However during the three days we were there the inclement weather beloved of Society conference fieldtrips let rip and provided a small dusting on the bare tops.

We visited Lake Rotokare east of Eltham where a charitable trust and the Regional Council have combined to erect a predator-proof fence round 230ha. The lush bush being enclosed includes large specimens of pukatea, rewarewa and tawa, together with lots of nikau palms and ferns. Birdlife though, was depressingly absent, apart from tomtits and tui, and small numbers of grey warblers. Surveys have only found one robin, which happily we heard. The aim is to transfer Kiwi, whiteheads, saddlebacks, stitchbirds, brown teal, kokako, takahe etc. and to provide an education facility and an on-site caretaker to police the vandalism occurring round the picnic area.

Members will remember the wonderful *Notornis mantelli* Mantlepiece Monstrosity trophy (see back page) which was awarded to our 'Plains Wanderers' team at least twice for winning the annual Twitchathon contest. Now that so few other teams enter this competition because of other commitments, or perhaps they lack the Canterbury Can Do spirit, the Council has decided to award it to the best talk on the Scientific Day given by an amateur birder. This year it went to a local Taranaki birder who gave an inspired talk about how he came to be standing up to give a talk! He had visited his beach at the end of his garden so regularly that his records contained species that would make you drool. Rare waders, terns, beach wrecks including albatrosses, all sorts of interesting observations, all delivered in a deadpan laconic style that emulated a Victor Borges tall story. It was wonderful. Several people came away believing his wife wrote it for him, but after quizzing them both I can report it was a joint

effort and well worth the trophy win.

The Atlas of Bird Distribution in NZ, 1999-2004 will be launched at Government House on 13th August. Our 31870 record sheets with over 1.5 million individual observations will be concentrated into 2135 maps on 530 pages, weighing 2.5kg! It will be a top-flight production and will be an entry in the Montana Book Awards. The Atlas will be distributed free to every paid-up member of OSNZ, so if you have let your membership lapse, or if you are thinking of joining or getting a friend to join, DO IT NOW. Forms can be printed off the website at www.osnz.org.nz/join or contact me [details at top of this newsletter].

The second Backyard Bird Survey took place in one week in July and will keep Eric Spurr very busy for quite some time, as over 2000 survey forms have been returned. This is a great effort and many thanks to all members who took part, especially those eager beavers who did surveys all over the place. Considering the dreadful weather it was a true labour of love for birds. I only managed two bellbirds in the hour, which was disappointing as there have been five at a time in better conditions all shouting 'I'm the BEST BIRD,' 'This is MY PATCH,' in a weird kind of discordant chorus.

<p>What's on at OSNZ Canterbury: July to December 2007</p>

Indoor Meetings

Evening indoor meetings take place at the Spreydon Bowling Club rooms, down the driveway roughly opposite 80 Domain Terrace, beginning at 7.30 pm. Use the parks down the drive and walk past the tennis courts to the clubroom entrance.

30th July – Tony Crocker, a popular and interesting speaker, spoke about birding in Borneo. David Clarkson's summary of the talk appears later in the newsletter

27th August – Bumper Bird Quiz, compered by Nick Allen. The competition will be run in teams with small prizes for all.

24th September – Rob Schuckard is a wader expert and one of the leaders in the recent study monitoring the movement of Godwits within and outside NZ, including satellite tracking of birds fitted with transmitters. He will talk about "Migratory Shorebirds of New Zealand in a Flyway under Threat."

29th October – Peter Langlands, who has previously entertained us with the use of technology to create artistic photographs of birds, will talk about the sea bird distribution on commercial fishing grounds and its implications for conservation and management .

26th November – We hope to have the Brown Teal Recovery Group talking about their progress in increasing the population of this endemic duck.

25th February 2008 – A reminder that this is members' night and we hope lots of you will be keen to share your birding adventures at the meeting.

Field Meetings

21st July – Regular water bird count, Ashburton Lakes.

25th August – Banks Peninsula Reserves Survey. Meet at Halswell Domain car park, 9.30 a.m. where car pooling will be arranged. Contact Jan Walker 322-7187 or shesagreen@gmail.com to say you will be coming and for further details.

15th September – Mystery trip to a beautiful inland site to be organised by Ron Nilsson and Jill West. Contact Jill at 980-7111 or email jill.west@paradise.net.nz for further details.

6th October – Ashley River Bird Survey. Meet at 9 am at the Ashley River Bridge Picnic Area, on the right, on the Rangiora to Ashley and Loburn Road. Be prepared for cold weather and wet feet. Gumboots are not suitable as the river may need to be crossed. Bring hot drinks, warm clothing and food. The survey should be done by mid-day to mid-afternoon, depending on numbers. Contact Eric Spurr at 03-313-8283 or spurre@landcareresearch.co.nz for further details.

16th November – Royal Show weekend. A weekend field trip to South Canterbury in the Palmerston area will be organised if sufficient interest is shown. Contact Jan Walker at 322-7187, email shesagreen@gmail.com as soon as possible if interested.

24th November – Second Ashley River Bird Survey, details as for 6th October above.

15th December – Summer Wader Count at Lake Ellesmere followed by the Christmas BBQ in the lovely surroundings of Colin and Cherry's home. You need to bring drink, salads, deserts, bread etc to accompany Colin's delicious meat. Contact Colin at 325-5891, email cherryhill@xtra.co.nz so he has an idea of numbers.

26th January 2008 – following last year's success, we will hold another Mini Twitchathon and BBQ at a place to be announced.

Garden Bird Survey

Eric Spurr said people had shown a huge amount of interest in the survey through faxes, emails and phone calls.



Photo: Ann Sherlock

Eric intends to write a press article to give feed back to those who have taken part. He has been interested to see the large number of people who feed birds. Butchers shops and supermarkets

now sell fat and seed mixtures, and many people put out sugar water to encourage Bellbirds. Eric says feeding birds is a contentious issue, but it does bring birds into the garden – a delight for bird lovers and possibly a means whereby birds are helped to survive the winter.

Eric also intends to write an article to promote feeding in time for next winter based on research he intends doing. He is happy to give a talk to us in the near future, as a basis for discussion on the topic.

Screw-Top wine bottles – putting birds in jeopardy?

Each winter thousands of Robins, Blackcaps and Chiffchaffs head for the cork oak forests of Portugal to escape the extremes of the northern climate. These age-old woodlands, the Montadoes, are a semi-natural wilderness, unique in Europe. Some trees are hundreds and even thousands of years old. But conservationists fear that changing from traditional corks to artificial stoppers could see Portugal chopping down the forests for more profitable land use.

Portugal's leading bird conservation organisation, SPEA, called on UK wine lovers to support the cork oaks, and help save many of the world's best loved birds. "The swing to artificial stoppers could mean the collapse of the cork industry. We say to the wine drinkers of the world – before buying a bottle, think twice. If you choose one with a natural cork stopper, you will be helping to protect one of the richest habitats in the whole of Europe" says the President of SPEA and this plea is supported by the RSPB.

An RSPB official says "This is one of the most beautiful landscapes in the world and is farmed in a natural way. The trees are harvested every 9 years; the cork is cut but the trees are not harmed and farmers know that when they plant new cork oaks they are doing it for their children's children. But if the trees are no longer sustainable they will probably be cut down and

the government will change the laws that protect these trees.”

Thanks to Janet Walsh for supplying this article on the dilemma of the conflict of interests between bird and wine lovers, which appeared in the Sunday Express in June 2003. Ed.

Mystery Bird Sighting

On 21 March 2007 at 09.45 hours in the Upper Inangahua Valley, Reefton, Len Turner heard a call he described as a haunting resonating call (“an eerie call like an Aboriginal wailing”) that he had not heard before. About 15 minutes later he saw at close range (10-15 metres) an unusual bird with the following description. “The plumage of the bird was steely grey with a bluish tinge. Most distinct were the wattles on the sides of its bill. The base of the wattles was a deep matt blue and the remainder (the larger part) ochre (fleshy orange-brown).” The bird appeared to be curious, looking at Len, turning its head from side to side. He viewed the bird for about 30 seconds, then it glided away with some heavy dull wing flapping. Len noted the rounded edge of the wings in flight, and described the flight as clumsy.

Further evidence of the presence of kokako was obtained the following day when Peter Rudolf (an experienced North Island kokako observer) and Len revisited the site. At 10.40 hours very distinctive kokako-like heavy wing beats were heard about 60m from the observers. Soon after this Len saw a bird making giant leaps up the trunk of a rimu. Unfortunately identification wasn't possible due to the position of the sun. Peter didn't see the bird hopping up the trunk but saw the bird glide off from a branch. Peter identified the bird as a kokako due to its size, colour (a light grey), its wingspan and flight. “The bird did a very shallow glide 3 degrees approximately. As it glided it produced a few intermittent very shallow wing beats (no sound).” The two observers attempted to get a closer view of the bird but were not successful

During these observations, Peter noted an extensive area of fresh moss grubbing along the

forest floor and extending up tree trunks higher than he thought weka would reach.

On 23 March 2007 Peter visited the area alone. Kokako-like calls were heard in the dawn chorus but some of these were made by tui and bellbirds. At 08.00 hours, 80m up-ridge from Len's 21 March sighting, Peter heard a bird moving in the branches of a rimu. After about 20 minutes the bird rustled leaves in the tree. A few minutes later Peter heard 2-3 very soft “contact” calls he described as “Boops”. These calls were similar to North Island kokako contact calls (“took”) though quite soft.

Thanks to Ron Nilsson and Rhys Buckingham for providing this item. Ed.

Birds in the Land of the Morning Calm

I visited South Korea for just over a fortnight in May 2007 with my fiancée Hyeza, with the intention of meeting some of her family and seeing some of the country, not primarily for birdwatching. Birdwatching came a definite third. Hyeza and I chose the northern spring to visit as this is a time (along with autumn) of relatively benign weather. Winters in Korea are extremely cold, with mornings still freezing until early May. Summers are steamily hot and wet, and so just as uncomfortable as winter. There is also the added advantage that birds are supposedly on the move through the area in spring and autumn, adding greater diversity to the avifauna at those seasons.

However, I saw precious little evidence of migrants, and was a bit disappointed that the birds weren't exactly singing their hearts out. It seemed that either summer visitors in South Korea are either naturally thin on the ground or they hadn't arrived at the time of my visit. The vast majority of winter visitors don't seem to linger either, as I saw very few of these – a visit before March (as mentioned in various trip reports I perused before departure) is obviously necessary to see any number of these. It was almost as though the forests were drawing breath

before the onslaught of spring – either that or they were breathing their last, like the New Zealand ones.

Having said the above, however, the forests were very pretty in their pale new green leaf. We had missed the last of the cherry blossom by a couple of weeks, but the azaleas were in full bloom. Some things that surprised me about the forests was all that leaf litter, but almost no thrushes, and the forest buntings, when I was more used to this family being open country birds in the UK/NZ.



Photo: Nick Allen
Hyeza and Nick, Morundae Busan

We visited many temples and old palaces during our stay, generally doing the ‘tourist thing’. Old Korean architecture is very stylish, and typically East Asian, with sweeping tiled roofs. The painting in the eaves of the temple roofs was breathtaking in its intricacy and colourfulness. In contrast newer Korean architecture is rather bland and lacking in character. It was this that greeted us on arrival in Seoul, the ride from the airport being through what seemed to be a long building site with vestiges of rice paddies and estuaries. South Korea is a fast-expanding and developing country. The city itself was the archetypal large city, with skyscrapers and an abundance of bland concrete office and apartment blocks. However the hillier parts of the city are still forested and the Han River, running straight through the heart of the city holds some bird interest (though more especially in winter), with waterfowl and gulls being a feature – and Pheasants numerous on one

island. One bird species I grew to love was the Brown-eared Bulbul. It was everywhere there were trees near towns and cities, and had a common call that sounded exactly like a dog’s squeaky toy.

Our first trip birding took us to the reportedly interesting Gwangneung National Arboretum. We had to book our entrance permit well in advance, as visitor numbers are limited on any given day – to 5,000. That’s OK I thought, a good policy to keep the place uncrowded. Wrong. In May, the area people were allowed to go was controlled to a small area. Imagine how much noise 4,000 schoolkids can make if all talking and shouting at the top of their voices. They were there. Wisely I think most of the birds heard them coming and scarpered. In most of the area hearing birds in the forest over the throng of people was difficult. Only in one fairly scrubby corner, obviously too boring for schoolgroups, was it quiet, and there we found some interesting birds. A male Rustic Bunting hopping around under some azaleas, its white eyebrow blazing, and a small group of small and exquisitely marked Tristram’s Buntings in another scrubby patch. A Daurian Redstart sang from the top of a tree. It could obviously see me as it kept well out of sight whenever I got close, and promptly shut up. The crowds at such tourist honey-pots were typical of Korea near the cities, the population is after all an order of magnitude or two higher than New Zealand.



Photo: Nick Allen
Daurian Redstart

After Seoul the next stop was the rather dreary city of Gunsan. On first sight it reminded me a bit of Gore or Bluff. It had that decaying workaday feel about it. It is next to an interesting estuary, however, the Geumgang. It used to be near an even more interesting estuarine area, Saemangeum, but unfortunately that area has now been almost entirely shut off from the sea and its vast mudflats are dead, seemingly along with a number of shorebirds that previously staged there and which were seen this year in emaciated condition fighting for whatever (largely inappropriate and nutrient-poor) food they could find. The lower Geumgang is still functioning, below the obligatory tidal barrage, with a thronging multitude of wading birds and waterfowl. It was great to catch up with 'old friends' I hadn't seen since leaving the UK 10 years ago like Dunlin, their black bellies immediately giving them away, Common Redshank with their unbelievably redder than red legs, and Spotted Redshanks, appearing like a small version of Black Stilts in their sooty breeding attire. Giving a more Australian feel were the large numbers of Mongolian Dotterels, Red-necked Stints and Whimbrels. Just offshore an elegant drake Northern Pintail floated, along with a small flotilla of Common Teal. In contrast the lake above the barrage held virtually no birds – mostly the odd egret and ubiquitous Spot-billed Ducks where there was enough riparian cover for them. This lake is overlooked by two impressive and imposing birdwatching centres, and hides so long that they look like strings of railway carriages. A pity they are here, where the birds aren't, and not overlooking the bird-filled mudflats nearby.

Gyeryongsan National Park is a typically small Korean natural park of wooded valleys and mountains. Forests in Korea are mostly composed of the northern species of various types of oak and maple, but appear strangely small and thin in comparison to those in western Europe. This may be due to the harsher Manchurian climate in Korea. The birds were oddly familiar, with Great Tit being the commonest bird, but other 'European' species such as Marsh Tit, Wren,

Jay, Nuthatch and Great Spotted Woodpecker also featuring. A nice surprise was three pairs of Mandarin Ducks on a stream, stunningly patterned males showing off their golden sails seemingly stuck onto their folded wings as an afterthought. At the Donghaksa nunnery a confiding male Daurian Redstart showed off its fiery plumage as it took nesting material to the eaves of the toilet block. Thankfully I wasn't arrested for taking photos in what could have been regarded by some as a sensitive area.

The ancient Silla capital of Gyeongju with its unearthly grassed burial mounds has another attraction – a rather unkempt gravelly semi-braided river, not too unlike those in Canterbury, except it had weirs every few hundred metres (a common feature in Korean towns and cities). Hyeza and I visited for an hour before our bus to Busan departed from the bus terminal just across a busy road. I was looking for Long-billed Plover, a bit like a Banded Dotterel, but dowdier and very much a birder's bird, and succeeded. What blew me away though was the number of migratory waders present. There were Green, Common and Wood Sandpipers scattered all down the river, along with good numbers of Greenshanks. Another bonus came in the form of the scarce and local Japanese Wagtail in its dapper black-and-white evening dress, complete with long tail.

Busan, Korea's main southern port, has plenty of wooded peninsulas jutting out, just waiting to attract migratory passerines. Well that's the theory, and it may be so in certain weather. It doesn't seem to be the case on brilliantly sunny days though. However, we did pick up a few gems like Yellow-throated Bunting with its bee-patterned head and punk-style crest, and impossibly yellow Black-naped Orioles. A target bird of the area, which turned out to be surprisingly common was Japanese White-eye, so very similar to our Silvereye, but not as pretty. Black Kites were fairly common, the only decent-sized birds of prey we saw in Korea. A trip to Eulsukdo in search of waders was largely unsuccessful as the tide was too high, but highlights were

tame Siberian Tattlers in their tiger-striped breeding plumage, that miniscule gem of the Charadrius plovers, the Kentish Plover, and the hilariously-named, but thankfully not particularly yellow Zitting Cisticola.



Photo: Nick Allen
Siberian Tattler

Leaving mainland Korea, we next ventured to the ‘honeymoon island’ of Jeju-Do. Honeymooners could often be picked out from the crowd by their amazing propensity to wear the same style tops. The male of the pair was usually also carrying a camera atop a small tripod. Birdwise the area was slightly different to the mainland. A nice bonus was that Blue Rock Thrushes were common anywhere near the coast. They weren’t fussy as to whether the rocks were natural (e.g. Jusangjooli – which looked like a scaled-down version of Northern Ireland’s Giants Causeway) or man-made (e.g. the World Cup stadium, or the E-Mart supermarket in Jeju City). The first one I saw had me stumped for a few hours, wondering what that black starling-shaped bird that flew like a thrush was. The colouring must be due to refraction (like a hummingbird’s gorget) as the blue and red only showed well in direct sunlight. Reef Herons could also be seen along the coast, which was picturesque in parts. In the forests one of the country’s best songsters, the Korean Bush Warbler, was common, giving out its ringing song (like all good songbirds it looked totally brown and dowdy). Another

denizen of the forests on the island, the Fairy Pitta was unfortunately silent and kept hidden. Another visit maybe a little later in the season would be needed for this must-see bird.

Altogether I enjoyed my trip round Korea, sightseeing and meeting Hyeza’s family. Though not a premier birding destination I’d love to go back some time – maybe in winter with its throngs of Baikal Teal, and the chance of seeing other mind-blowing species such as Chinese Merganser, Pallas’s Sea Eagle and various cranes (of the bird sort, not construction).

NICK ALLEN

Borneo with Tony Crocker

Borneo is a travel destination that mixes colour and diversity – and plenty of wildlife. Tony Crocker’s presentation to the OSNZ Canterbury evening meeting on July 30 captured the character and spirit of the place, and gave members detailed information about a destination he had enjoyed visiting while leading a study tour.

Tony stressed that the tour to the island – part of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Sultanate of Brunei – was not bird-oriented, but his presentation included interesting pictures of the birdlife, as well as landscapes, reptiles, insects, and the equatorial plantlife.

“It has good infrastructure and air services, the food is outstanding, and the climate is delightful for most of the year. It rains quite a lot but it doesn’t get cold. There is not a rich lifestyle, but the people seem extraordinarily happy,” he said.

The landscape includes arguably the highest peak in Southeast Asia, depending on where the region’s boundaries are drawn. Although there has been a lot of land clearing, and second-growth forest, there is a still interesting habitat to be found, with a fringe of magnificent rainforest along the rivers.

Tony photographed some of the colourful insect life, Orangutang, Crab-eating Macaques, Proboscis Monkeys, a Pit Viper in the bushes

next to a hotel dining area, orchids, rhododendrons, and the giant Rafflesia flower which replicates the smell of rotten meat to attract flies for pollination purposes.

He was able to show members pictures of Blue-eared Kingfishers, Stork-billed Kingfishers, and a Blue-throated Bee-eater. There were surprisingly few birds of prey, but a Crested Serpent Eagle co-operated for a photograph, resting awhile with its wings spread before flying off.

He also photographed some of the spectacular range of Hornbills, and the Crested Fireback, a type of pheasant.

Borneo has extensive cave systems which are home to Swiftlets, the little birds which construct nests from dried saliva. Their nests are later harvested by locals climbing hundreds of metres up rickety rope ladders, to be made into the much prized and very expensive bird's nest soup.

The same caves are home to millions of bats which pluck up their courage and make their way outside at dusk, leaving the caves in long swirls that trail across the sky. Tony was able to watch the Bat Hawks waiting outside for dinner. They would swoop in, pluck a bat out of the crowd, eat it as they circled slowly and then return for seconds.

Other bird sightings included a group of Pacific Golden Plover, Little-ringed Plover, Long-toed Stint, and a Snipe whose species could not be distinguished.

Temperatures were in the low 30s during the middle of the day, but dropped to the 20s overnight. Deet-based insect repellent was used to stay safe from the malaria-carrying mosquitoes which would bite at night.

“The diversity is what makes the place so truly fascinating,” said Tony. “It’s a part of the world that’s often overlooked by inveterate travellers from our part of the world.”

DAVID CLARKSON

Beach Patrols

Beach patrols generally take place on the first Saturday of the month. They involve a group of members getting together in the morning and spending a few hours working their way up a designated stretch of beach and finding any dead birds that have been washed up, classifying them, and filling in a report card to be sent to the national office. This valuable information is collated to reveal clues about what is happening out at sea.

The Canterbury beach patrols are co-ordinated by Jan Walker. Please contact Jan at shesagreen@gmail.com or 322 7187, to get details of when the next patrol will take place.

Contacting The Wrybill

The Wrybill is issued to members of the Canterbury branch of the Ornithological Society of New Zealand, and to other branches of the society, every four to five months.

Ideas, suggestions and contributions are welcome. If you have been involved in any birding activity within the region or in some far-flung corner of the country, or the globe, please consider writing us something about it. Your information will certainly be worth placing on the record. Digital photos are welcome.

The advertising rate is \$15 for a half A4 page.

Contact details: Editor Ann Sherlock, Phone 03-355-4194, email robnann@paradise.net.nz

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Photo: Jan Walker
Notornis Mantelli Mantlepiece Monstrosity