

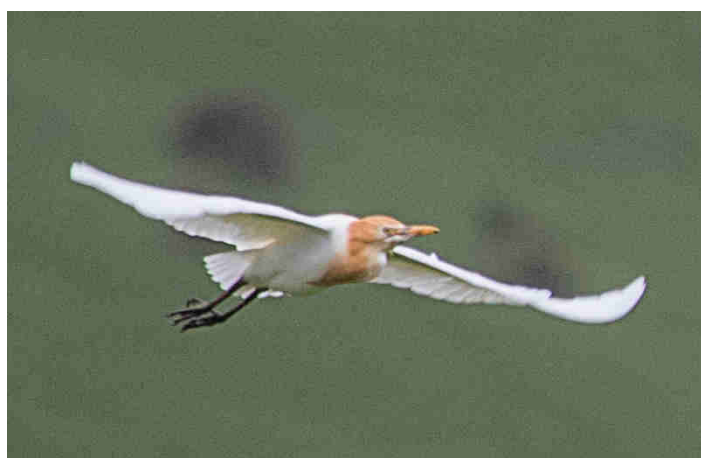
Report on Birds New Zealand field trip to the Manawatū Estuary, 19th October 2019

On Saturday 19th October, three of us (Esther Williams, Karen Pratt and myself) left Whanganui for Foxton Beach and the Manawatū R estuary to celebrate the return of migratory waders from their breeding grounds in the Northern Hemisphere, an event organised by the Manawatū Estuary Trust. This annual event also serves to remind us that the Manawatū estuary is one of six wetlands in New Zealand designated under the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (more commonly known as the Ramsar Convention). This is primarily because the estuary supports about 1% of the world's population of wrybill during its passage north at the start of winter and on its return to its South Island breeding sites.

The weather was less than ideal for finding birds. A WNW near-gale force wind blew throughout the day, accompanied initially by intermittent rain squalls. Despite this, we opted to drive, as far as possible, the backroads to Foxton Beach. Our first stop was on Whangaehu Beach Rd, about 1.3 km from its junction with SH3. This is dairy-farm country, but also a long-known wintering site for a flock of cattle egrets, occupancy of which dates from the mid-1980s. Cattle egrets had been recorded here earlier in the year, so it was no great surprise to see a flock of 7 birds, 5 of which were in full breeding plumage (see photos below). There is no evidence that the species breeds here or anywhere else in New Zealand, so we assume that these birds would soon leave to breed somewhere in New South Wales, Australia.



A flock of 7 cattle egrets photographed on a Whangaehu Beach Rd farm. Note that five of the birds are in breeding plumage, with buff head, neck and upper back and breast feathers (photograph by Karen Pratt)



One of the Whangaehu Beach Rd adult cattle egrets showing its breeding plumage of buff head, neck and upper breast feathers, and yellow bill with a reddish flush (heavily cropped from a photograph by Karen Pratt)

The stop on Whangaehu Beach Rd produced only a small number of common farmland birds (mallard, southern black-backed gull, Australian magpie, skylark, house sparrow). The eBird checklist for this stop can be seen at <https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S60723640>.

Apart from a brief and abortive stop on Tangimoana road in the relative shelter of a stand of mature pines, which we soon left because of the risk of branches and pinecones being dislodged by the wind, our next stop was at the Tangimoana boat launch ramp on the Rangitikei R estuary. Only 7 species were recorded in 12 minutes surveying before the gale caused us to move off. Variable oystercatcher (2), Caspian tern (4) and a solitary pied shag were the more notable species seen. Pied shag is a species that seems to be expanding its range regionally. The full checklist can be viewed at <https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S60725637>.

A stop at the first of the Palmer Rd ponds on the outskirts of Foxton Beach, produced an eBird checklist of 13 species in just over a quarter of an hour (see <https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S60726881> for details). Most were species such as chaffinch, greenfinch and goldfinch singing in the pines on the opposite side of the road but there were some waterbirds on the pond, most notably New Zealand scaup (17) and New Zealand dabchick (4, two pairs). A new housing development now almost surrounds these ponds, so it will be interesting to see how birdlife is affected over time by this development.

The Holben Parade picnic area in Foxton Beach presents a good example of how an area set aside for recreation need not necessarily be unfavourable to birds if they are not overtly disturbed. Most of those using the area at the time were introduced species, with chaffinch, greenfinch and goldfinch predominating. Small flocks were scattered over the area, foraging for either insects or seeds in the lawns. Among the native species were white-faced heron (which breeds in the pines above the picnic area), sacred kingfisher, Australasian shoveller and grey teal (the latter two species occurring alongside 17 mallard on the ponds in the park: see details at <https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S60727913>).

For the 'Welcome to the Birds' event, around 30 people gathered at 1 p.m. at the Dawick St viewing platform, which overlooks the high-tide bird roost on the sandspit in the Manawatū R estuary. After a welcome and karakia by a local kaumātua, attention turned to the birds roosting on the sandspit and others nearby. These included, by my count, 5 royal spoonbill, 172 bar-tailed godwit (of which at least 57 were juveniles), 12 red knot, 8 black-billed gull, 11 Caspian tern, and 3 pied shag (out in the estuary).



Roosting bar-tailed godwit and Caspian terns on the sandspit opposite the Dawick St viewing platform

A little egret had been seen earlier in the day by others. This is probably the long-term overstayer that has been reported from the Manawatū estuary and nearby Lake Omanu for at least the past 18 months, although the species has been recorded almost annually since 2013. Overall, we recorded 18 species <https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S60731980>.



On 19th October 2019, around 30 people from the Manawatū Estuary Trust, Forest & Bird, and the Manawatū and Whanganui branches of Birds New Zealand gathered to ‘Welcome the Birds’ at the Manawatū estuary

In summary, despite the less-than-favourable conditions, the outing produced several worthwhile sightings and 5 eBird checklists for the New Zealand Bird Atlas (<https://birdatlas.co.nz/>). We look forward to further outings, ideally with better weather encouraging more people to participate.

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Birds New Zealand (Ornithological Society of New Zealand Inc.)

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