

# Birds of Canterbury Symposium

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## INTRODUCTION

Recent studies by Worthy (1997) and Worthy and Holdaway (1996) have shown that in prehuman times bird diversity was greater in Canterbury and Otago than elsewhere in the South Island. Deforestation was faster and more thorough in Canterbury than elsewhere in New Zealand and the province is now one of the country's most highly modified regions. The eastern flanks of the Southern Alps are the only part of Canterbury where extensive areas of indigenous habitats remain. Only three very small (the largest is 15 ha) and greatly modified forest remnants remain on the Canterbury Plains and on Banks Peninsula when timber milling ceased in 1920 only 1.2% (800 ha) of the forest present in 1840 remained (Wilson 1998).

The first two papers in the symposium highlighted Canterbury's previous avian diversity and discussed the extent to which the avifauna has changed. Most remaining papers in the symposium discussed aspects of the biology and management of birds in the now highly modified habitats. The Canterbury Plains are now almost entirely farmed and exotic plants and birds are more numerous than native species. Sagar and Thomsen discussed the biology of the native South Island Pied Oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus finschi*) and the introduced Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) respectively and related breeding success to farm management. Thomsen showed that research on introduced species common in New Zealand but declining in their native range is of value for conservation of the same species in Europe. Ridley reported on the importance of exotic plant foods in the diet of Bellbird (*Anthornis melanura*) and Kereru (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*) in a Canterbury Plains forest remnant. While both species utilised exotic plants in and adjacent to the remnant neither species appeared to be dependant on introduced plants.

Presentations by Crossland and Sanders discussed wetland enhancement in two contrasting environments. Crossland reported huge increases in the numbers of native birds, particularly waterfowl after the development of wetlands and riparian strips in Christchurch City. Sanders reported on the first two years of experimental management of wetlands in the MacKenzie Country. Challies described the alarming decline in numbers of White-flipped Penguins (*Eudyptula minor*) on Banks Peninsula. Both he and Sanders showed the importance of intensive predator control in the conservation of the species of concern.

The braided rivers of Canterbury and adjacent provinces support a distinctive community of wetland birds, three species of which are threatened or endangered. The Black Stilt (*Himantopus novaeseelandiae*) is one of New Zealand's rarest birds and despite 18 years of intensive and often controversial management numbers