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SHORT NOTE

RED-CAPPED DOTTEREL IN NORTH CANTERBURY

During the 1960s and 1970s, I spent much of my spare time wandering upstream of the mouths of the rivers and tributaries of northern Canterbury. During this time, I have been aware of a general presence of the Red-capped Dotterel (*Charadrius alexandrinus ruficapillus*), although it has not been easy to find and seldom in the same place twice. I have encountered it, in singles or small groups, mainly on the Ashley and Waipara Rivers and once on the Leader River between early July at the earliest and late November at the latest. I have the impression that it arrives in late winter and prefers the shallower, more quietly flowing streams with plenty of cover nearby. However, my sightings on these quieter streams have not been at the same places from year to year, or even from month to month. If, then, they really prefer the major rivers, the reason that their population has not increased greatly may be that these rivers are subject to heavy flash floods from July to December. They do not seem to re-nest, and so with lost nests, they may depart early.

All my sightings have been within about 15 km of the river mouths. Since Shand's reports of a female Red-capped breeding with a male Banded Dotterel (*C. bicinctus*) in 1947 and 1950 (Oliver 1955, *New Zealand birds*), the general attitude to any mention I have made about birds I have seen has been to assume that they too are hybrids. However, my descriptions seem to match that of adult Red-capped (B. D. Heather, pers. comm.), lacking any suggestion of the size, pattern, or general colouring of Banded Dotterels.

The first account in my notes is of a field weekend 25-28 October 1963 by the local OSNZ branch, which included a survey of the Ashley River from the Gorge bridge to the main road. A pair of Red-capped (called "hybrids" as usual) with two chicks was found. Probably because of a typing error, this was reported as five chicks in the report (*Notornis* 11 (1): 61-62, 1964). In my notes, the adult description

states rufous on top of head, no bands, slight side bars, and white underparts.

On 28 August 1966, among the breeding Banded Dotterels and Wrybills (*Anarhynchus frontalis*), I saw eight dotterels that were smaller and greyer than the Banded Dotterels, with very white underparts, a broader white forehead, lores and side patch dark to black, and some with rufous on the head and continuing down behind the black face patch.

On 12 August 1967 and again on 9 September, I encountered four birds of the same description in my wanderings. At one point a bird showing complete bright white underneath appeared, flying low and daintily above a stream. I followed to where it landed and noted the following features: smaller and greyer above than Banded Dotterel and with a more erect stance; bill dark; a very broad white forehead band bordered above by a precise black band, and above that a chestnut or rufous crown; the rufous continued down the side of the head from the dark superciliary streak and the black lores to form almost a crescent on the upper side of the chest, the crescent ending sharply and black. One rather distant photograph shows what could be a hint of a brownish band where a Banded Dotterel's would begin, but I did not see this in the field.

This bird's call, a sweeter, lighter version of the Banded Dotterel's *pit pit pit*, drew forth its mate. She had no rufous crown or black above the broad white forehead, but she had some rufous on the side crescent, a paler black patch, and her legs were greyer than the male's black. I caught a small downy chick that ran from the area, half of whose face was black with sand under the skin, presumably forced through the eye socket during a tumble during the flash flood that had occurred two days before. After an hour's delay while I took the chick back to the car and removed the sand with a syringe, I could not find the adults. On playing the tape of their call that I had made when first seeing them, they soon appeared, approaching stealthily but calling repeatedly. The next day, I could not find them, and not until 11 November did I see an adult pair at this site.

Most of the birds I have seen in the later months have been singles, of rather indeterminate description, presumably either females or grown chicks. The adults seem to leave the rivers early.

On 5, 12, and 19 August 1978, I saw an adult pair of the usual description at the Ashley mouth. On 26 August, heavy rain locally and in the foothills washed out the whole estuary, leaving no riverside feeding places. Judging that the only refuge left would be the bank still holding between the lagoon and the sea, I reached this bank in heavy rain and found a large number of Banded Dotterel, Wrybill, Black-fronted Tern (*Sterna albobriata*), and the pair of Red-capped Dotterels.

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