

Birding to Nelson and back

The 2024 Birds New Zealand conference in Nelson was the biggest and best yet, with almost a quarter of a thousand in attendance and a wide variety of engaging, professional and inspirational talks. I've been going to these since I was 15, and I consider them the best excuse to visit and experience the part of the country they are held in. Nine years on, Nelson is on the opposite side of the South Island to me, a 12-hour drive from Dunedin. As such, my partner Ela Hunt and I took the opportunity to bird our way up the island. Being winter, days were short and we had to make the most of daylight and fit as much in as humanely possible. We were joined by passionate birders Bradley Shields of Franz Josef and Noah Fenwick of Twizel for the bulk of the trip. Maybe we could reach 100 species? Not likely, we thought.

On day one, the first birds of note were a kōtuku/white heron and a kārearea/New Zealand falcon near Moeraki, as well as three toroa/albatross species sea-watched from Katiki Point. Next stop was Bortons Pond just out of Duntroon which proved very fruitful with a couple of vocal kotoreke/marsh crane and a black-fronted dotterel on the mud. Coming into Te Manahuna Mackenzie we spotted a pūteketeke/crested grebe and kawau tūī/little black shag on Lake Ruataniwha, the latter a local rarity much to Noah's delight. We left Twizel an hour before sunrise (-5°C) to have our best shot at chukor, an introduced gamebird Ela had yet to encounter. Although four of us combed Mount John for several hours we just couldn't find any. Recently reported kakī/black stilt and Australasian little grebe also failed to show, as Lake Murray started to freeze over. Spirits not yet dampened, we made haste across the sterile Canterbury Plains to Christchurch and popped in to see the lone male pāteke/brown teal holed up at Travis Wetland, then on Lewis Pass for the night where a ruru/morepork sang us to sleep.

Descending into sunny Nelson the following morning saw the temperature rise to a balmy 16°C, and we were delighted to make a record high count of 39 birds for one of our newest natives, the Australian wood ducks. Next up was a stroll around the recently established fenced Brook Waimārama Sanctuary, for a shot at their kākāriki karaka/orange-fronted parakeets. Although prolific, they are still mostly keeping to the upper reaches of the beech forest, and we sadly didn't have long to search (but Bradley still thinks he heard one). Boulder Bank was the local hotspot, and we made several visits. Restricted access didn't hinder us from scoping a flock of weweia/dabchicks on the ponds, as well as a white-winged black tern. Bradley also scoped three unseasonal arctic skuas offshore, and I called a reef heron from the car. On the final day of the New Zealand Bird Atlas project we gave it one last go for nocturnal birds in central Nelson, and somewhat poetically our final checklist had no species on it. We were reminded to not be sad the Atlas was over, but to be happy that it happened.

Post-conference, we had a three-day tour of Golden Bay led by Bradley who grew up there. Bay of Plenty RR Paul Cuming was a welcome addition for this leg and we birded our way right up to the top of the south. In Motueka we were lucky to watch marsh crakes and Australian terns alongside conference-goers Max, Maria, Te Arawhetu and Johnathan. Cape Farewell yielded seabirds too distant to be sure about, but also a lovely pair of pihoihoi/pipits. A night was spent at Mangarākau Swamp lodge, where we heard mātātā/fernbirds, a kakaruai/robin and pūweto/spotless crane. The kitchen overlooks the wetland, and while making dinner a distinctive stocky bird flapped its way past the window. "Bittern, bittern, BITTERN!" We chanted so the others could run over and glimpse it in the nick of time. What luck to spot one of our most endangered species while cutting onions!

After dipping twice at Māharau, I was happy to finally view a moho pererū/banded rail in the South Island by Waimea Inlet. Five kōtuku in one day rounded things off nicely.

The drive back to Dunedin was quieter as energy levels dropped, but success in Marlborough with flocks of ciril buntings and hoary-headed grebes followed by an unforgettable trip off Kaikōura really made the entire trip. On a two-hour boat tour we had exceptional encounters with a parāoa/sperm whale, seven paikea/humpback whales, hundreds of dolphins, a southern giant petrel, two Antarctic fulmars, and many more seabirds. All that on a still calm day, right inshore. The tally sat at 96 birds for the trip. One last push for 100 species saw us try for northern shoveler at Pegasus wetlands in Christchurch right on dark. No dice. That's okay though, when you add in the mammals, we reached 103!

Thanks to Birds New Zealand for the Fledgling Fund grant to attend this year's conference and speak about my Master's project on the movements and plumages of the critically endangered pukunui/southern dotterel. I was also privileged to win the annual photo competition in three categories; bird behaviour, bird moult and marked bird. The grant was invaluable for me to be able to get to Nelson and learn incredible insights into the advances of bird conservation and research in Aotearoa New Zealand happening today. See you all in Auckland!

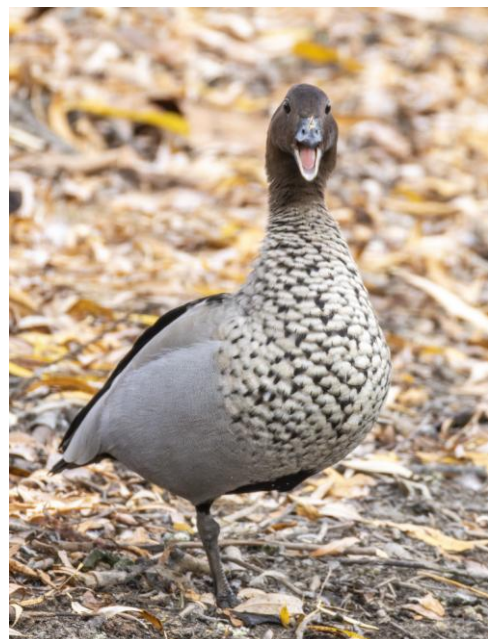
By Oscar Thomas



*Birders. Golden Bay
(Paul Cumings)*



*Banded rail. Nelson.
(Oscar Thomas)*



*Australian wood duck. Nelson.
(Oscar Thomas)*