

KUAKA











Welcome to the newsletter of the South Auckland Branch of Birds NZ

Te Kahui Matai Manu o Aotearoa

Issue 64 – **FEBRUARY 2025**

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Hi everyone, welcome to issue number 64 of Kuaka. We started back in April 2020, during covid, to keep our members up-to-date with what is happening with the manu of the South Auckland/Coromandel region.

Since 2020, we have evolved to include less posts from our Facebook page and more articles on birds from around the motu and the world – including articles written by your editor. The format of the newsletter has also evolved.

What we are missing, with the exception of an article in this issue, is more from our birding friends on the Coromandel. If anyone has any ideas on who I could contact for regular updates on what is going on over there, please let me know.

The left-hand photo above is spoonies at Port Waikato back in Nov (photo: Maria Timmermans). On the right is a couple of pied stilts up Awhitu way (thank you Kate for the photo).

**Our next meeting will be on Tuesday
March 11 at 7.30pm**

Would you like to contribute to our newsletter a drawing or photo, detail of a sighting, or maybe an article or two – just drop an email to the editor.

We would love to hear from you.

PROGRAMME FOR 2025

Monthly Meetings: held on the second Tuesday of each month, at the Papakura Croquet Club, 1 Chapel Street Papakura. Meetings start at 7:30. Visitors welcome. \$3.00 donation to cover costs please

Mar 11	Monthly meeting	Peter Fryer will give a talk on his cruise to the Subantarctic Islands
Apr 8	Monthly meeting	Louis Santiago from the Conservation Engineering Society will talk about their work
May 13	TBA	
Jun 10	TBA	
Jun 14		Firth of Thames wader census (HT1005 3.0m)
Jun 29		Manukau wader census (HT1326 3.8m)

We will be conducting the winter wader censuses, on the Manukau Harbour and Firth of Thames, in June.

Sue would love to hear from anyone who is able to assist especially if you are experienced in counting large flocks of birds. If you aren't we can pair you up with someone who is more experienced.



Tūturiwhatu whānu at Big Bay (photo from Kate)

RR REPORT FOR FEBRUARY 2025

Happy new year to everyone, I hope you enjoyed the Christmas break and got to see some interesting birds over the summer. We had 17 members at the BBQ in mid-January, including two members we hadn't seen for a while (it was good to catch up). The weather was good to us so we enjoyed a 'stroll' around Davids hilly bush block. Many thanks to David and Lynne Lawrie for hosting us.



Our AGM was held this week. I was re-elected as RR and David Lawrie remains Treasurer. Our financial situation remains healthy, although the room hire has increased.

Unlike last summer when I was travelling around the region completing checklists of the Atlas, I have stayed closer to home this summer. I pass the Wattle Downs ponds most days so like to call in sometimes to see what birds are around. A white heron was a welcome sight for a while and in late December four brown teal appeared for a short time. I have noted that grey teal numbers have been increasing. The white-winged black tern has been around for several months now and was last seen on the 13th.

In December there was an influx of over 100 poaka/pied stilts and a few kotuku-ngutu-papa/spoonbill feeding regularly at the ponds, even when the tide on the nearby harbour was low, so they must be finding something tasty to eat. Now there are large flocks of three types of gull resting on the grass or in the water, moulting plenty of feathers. Recent unwelcome arrivals have been around 50 Canada geese, joining the flock of greylag geese who have been resident for a few years now (they stay because of the regular feeding, of bread of course, they receive from visitors to the ponds).

Happy birding

Sue



Spoonies fooling around at Wattle Downs back in December
Photos: Mike Clark



The white-winged black tern at Wattle Downs
Photo: Mike Clark



The team in the Hunas (Photo: Wendy)

In the week before Christmas South Auckland ran a camp for young birders based at the Pukorokoro/Miranda Shorebird Centre. We had nine students of high school age, six boys and three girls, who came from as far afield as Christchurch and Japan [yes, really]. We aimed to encourage their interest in birds and give them a taste of the range of birding activities available to them. It turned out that the encouragement was unnecessary, the participation enthusiastic and some of it rubbed off on the old folks too.

First stop was the Robert Findlay Reserve for the rising tide and the magic of flocks of kuaka coming low overhead to roost on the ponds. We set up our scopes in front of thousands of shorebirds and started sorting through the flock. An Australian gull-billed tern was a special treat. Later visits focussed more on band recoveries, identification and counting.

An early start for mist netting and a good catch gave everyone a chance to band and process several birds under close supervision. The highlights were two kotare and a tui.

Next day we trekked to Kidd's shell-banks the highlights of which were an eastern curlew, four whimbrel and two grey plover. The day was not over when we got home. After an early dinner DOC ranger Ken Brown led us down to Kopuatai Wetland for an evening of matuku surveying and even before dusk they were booming.

It was a late night but we started before dawn the following morning for bush birds in the Hunua Ranges. Guided by ARC ranger Ruth Cordey we had some good views of kokako and were informed about the management program. A captivating bonus was a pipiwharau chick being fed by its riorio foster parents.

The field work was supported by a lot of classroom time covering the logistics and theory beforehand and a debrief afterward. The topics ranged from identification and ethical field craft through banding and band recoveries, counting, and most of all the value of recording information for the future.

It was a full week where we covered much of the best birding South Auckland has to offer and I was not the only one exhausted at the end of it. When the participants were asked what we should have left out the answer was "nothing".

Ian Southey, Convenor

[Well done Ian, the two events I participated in were enjoyable and, judging by their chatter, the boys who came with me in my car were certainly finding the week worthwhile. Shame about the early start, 4.30am, to the Hunuas. Wendy]

IN DEFENCE OF THE SUPER WING PLOVER

Thanks to Bruce Shanks for the following words:

Look at me

Can't you see
I am a handsome bird
Tho' you couldn't say I'm seen
And never ever heard.

Blackhead
White throat
Yellow wattles
Grey-brown coat

I stand up tall
And run tip toe
I am sure you must have seen me
Somewhere on the go.

I wonder where you've seen me
I spread myself around
Paddocks, parks, or mudflats
Are favoured stomping grounds.

And if you could be thinking
What would I like to eat?
Invertebrates, crustaceans
My, they go down a treat.

Some grubs and insects that I eat
Are known as pests by you
Well in my daily diggings
I get rid of quite a few.
So though I may be noisy
It would be quite sad
To judge me just on sound alone
'cause I'm not all that bad

Ah! Yes look at me
Can't you see
I'm such a helpful handsome bird
Is it at all possible
That you could spread the word?
ADH-

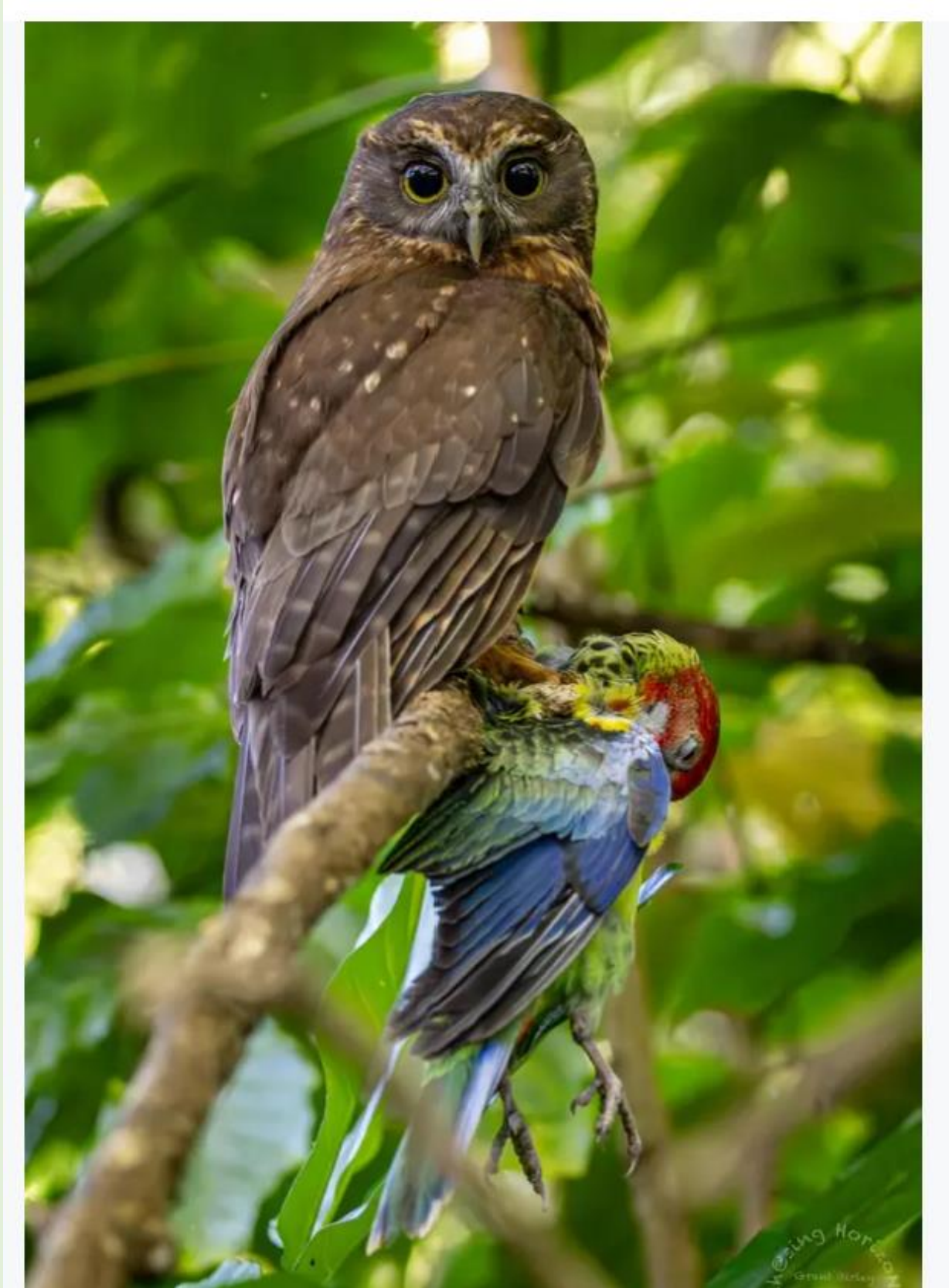


Image: Phil Battley

Parents trying to rescue chick who
fell of the curb-stone, near their
nest. Flat Bush.

Image: Marie-Louise Myburgh





Ruru just after catching an unsuspecting rosella fledgling
Photo: Grant Birley

 **Dates:** 14-17 April 2025

 **Venue:** University of Auckland, city campus, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand

 **Hosted by:** SPREP with co-hosts University of Auckland (UoA), SPC and WSU

 **Registration QR code:**



Photo: Edin Whitehead



Photo: Edin Whitehead

2025 Oceania Seabirds

« talking, listening and hands-on »

Mission

2025 Oceania Seabirds will bring the attention of the international and Oceania community to the importance of seabirds within the world's largest body of water, the Pacific Ocean | the Great Ocean

Indigenous names for the Pacific Ocean | The Great Ocean: Moananuiākea (Hawai); Te Moana Nui a Kiwa (New Zealand Māori)



Photo: Tehani Withers



MATUKU MOANA/REEF HERON

On Dec 17, 2024 Leighton Simmons (AK Council) provided a quick update of their reef heron survey.

We did one day on the Manukau Harbour and found four pairs of nesting reef heron, nine birds in total including one chick in the Cornwallis cave site. We also checked the top of Awhitu but didn't find any birds there. I think it was near high tide so we could have missed birds on nests or the birds from Cornwallis-Whatipu regularly fly across to forage at Awhitu.

We seem to be in the middle of the breeding season now so we've been assuming birds are nesting when they have disappeared into caves or crevices behind vegetation. We've also seen huge numbers of black-backed gulls and some red billed gulls nesting in the same locations as the reef heron and chasing them away. I think this is a big threat for the reef heron.

We have done two days on the Hauraki and checked Karamurama, Pakihi, Ponui, west coast of Rotoroa, Pakatoa, Tarahiki, west coast of Rangitoto/Motutapu, Rakino, and Noises. I have more day on the Manukau and one around Kawau in January. There are currently two nests on Motutara in that area. Hopefully more on the other islands.

We saw the probable nest on Passage Rock. A bird flew around the island and was chased by black backed gulls and then disappeared into a small cave. There was also a single bird in Oranga Bay on Rakino. We lost sight of it so it might have also gone into a nest cavity north of there.

We found a single bird on Motuhoropapa Island in the Noises which may have disappeared into a cave on the northern tip of the island. Great to see they are persisting there because it seems some of the historic nest sites have been abandoned

We also had a look on Koi Island but didn't see any reef heron. We didn't have time to check Motukaha off Waiheke or Crusoe Island but those have previously had nests and would be good to check soon. Goat Island is another old nest site but may be abandoned now with the number of visitors.

There was a nest on Tiritiri in 2014. The team there haven't seen any since and do an annual coastal count. There are some recent records nearby so they may have returned. Our skipper had seen a reef heron near there last week, I think on Kotanui/Frenchmans Cap off Whangaparaoa.



Photo from Kate

A COUPLE OF GREAT PHOTOS



Awesome photo – kotare v tui



THE ONEMANA DOTTIES

On February 7 Chris McDonald, from the Onemana dotterel care team, supplied us with the following report for the 2024/25 breeding season.

Our last little southern end tuturiwhatu/dotterel chick, now seven weeks old, was seen today near its nesting site with good sized tail feathers trying them out. A parent was still busy chasing off black back gulls on the beach. I'm so pleased these very conscientious parents have managed to get 1 of their triplets through to fledging.

We had nine pairs of dott's and our final results for the breeding season are:

44 eggs
21 chicks
7 fledged chicks

Our two VOC pairs both reared and fledged one chick each.

Well documented problems this season with our D tuturiwhatu include a kahu taking out up to 18 nest eggs in just a few days in September. We think that it was possibly stopped by Glenn putting up his drone to scare it off. Also, we had the local domestic cat caught on our camera interfering with nests and taking chicks on multiple occasions, in fact taking out as many as six chicks, all taken in its night time prowling area north of the stream.

On the positive side this season:

- No real storms this year to contend with, thank goodness.
- A lot of interest and support from locals and much more compliance from dog owners.
- Two very successful "Paint a Dottie" fundraisers.



Here is our little miracle chick – now fledged, that somehow survived the waves and then the cat visits not too far from this site – it was just far enough away!

Many thanks to you all for your ongoing help with our special Onemana Dotties. The great result we have achieved here with seven fledged Dotterel chicks and two VOC chicks could never have happened without all of our combined team efforts!

REMARKABLE FOSSIL DISCOVERY HINTS AT ANTARCTIC ORIGIN OFF ALL MODERN BIRDS

A near-perfect fossilized skull discovered in Antarctica reveals the bridge between prehistoric and modern birds, a new study has found. The fossil is a specimen of a species called [Vegavis iaai](#), which lived around 69 million years ago – more than two million years before the mass extinction that wiped out all non-avian dinosaurs.

It has a long, pointed beak and a brain shape unlike any other Mesozoic birds, which were markedly different from species that would evolve into the class of feathered creatures we see around us today.



Digital reconstruction of the Late Cretaceous (~69 million years old) crown bird *Vegavis iaai*, completed following high-resolution micro-computed tomography of a fossil-bearing concretion discovered on Vega Island, Antarctic Peninsula. (C. Torres and J. Gronke)

Ever since *Vegavis* was described 20 years ago, some paleontologists suspected the genus might be an early member of modern birds, within the order of waterfowl. Others doubted it since modern birds were extremely rare prior to the asteroid impact that triggered the end-Cretaceous extinction.

But they were missing what is arguably the most important piece of *Vegavis*, at least when it comes to taxonomy: a somewhat-intact skull. "Few birds are as likely to start as many arguments among paleontologists as *Vegavis*," says lead author Christopher Torres, a paleontologist from Ohio University. "This new fossil is going to help resolve a lot of those arguments. Chief among them: where is *Vegavis* perched in the bird tree of life?"

Bird fossils can be quite delicate, and few from this time are preserved in such good shape as this one. All other *Vegavis* specimens found to date have been either skeletons sans head, or just bits of the skull. The researchers suspect the species may have survived the mass extinction because of their Antarctic location, which would have offered a temperate climate with lush vegetation at a time when the rest of the world was quite uninhabitable.

"Elsewhere globally, the rapid environmental upheaval characterizing the K–Pg boundary is generally marked by similarly rapid replacement of stem birds by crown birds, followed by diversification of the latter early in the Palaeogene," the authors write.

That makes *V. iaai* the best representative we have for the bridge between prehistoric and modern birds.

The researchers used X-ray micro-computed tomography to scan the skull and digitally reconstruct it in three dimensions, revealing details of its braincase, palate, rostrum and mandible, as well as its brain shape. The specimen hints at features consistent with modern waterfowl, but unlike the ducks and geese of today, *V. iaai* had a slender, pointed beak and powerful jaw muscles for snapping up fish: features that are more similar to those of diving birds of today like grebes and loons.

It has a well-developed salt gland in the nasal region of its beak, a feature that removes sodium chloride from the blood of some marine bird species with diets high in seafood and, consequentially, salt. The rest of the fossil skeleton builds on this picture of *V. iaai*'s aquatic lifestyle, with legs that positioned the feet to propel the bird through the water in pursuit of swimming prey. "Those few places with any substantial fossil record of Late Cretaceous birds, like Madagascar and Argentina, reveal an aviary of bizarre, now-extinct species with teeth

and long bony tails, only distantly related to modern birds," says paleontologist Patrick O'Connor from Ohio University. "Something very different seems to have been happening in the far reaches of the Southern Hemisphere, specifically in Antarctica."

This research was published in *Nature* 06 February 2025 by Jess Cockerill



Artistic rendering of *Vegavis iaai*, in pursuit of fish in the shallow ocean off the coast of the Antarctic peninsula. (Mark Witton)

Thanks for reading Kuaka issue # 64

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If you would like to contribute to our newsletter - whether you just want to supply a drawing, photo, or maybe even an article or two – just drop an email to the editor.

Hope you enjoyed the read

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