**BRaid AGM, July 26, 2013**

**Chairman’s Report**

Welcome

Our last AGM was almost precisely 1 year ago. Since that time we have had 4 meetings, with between 6-10 persons present.

Considering we are only a small amateur group working in our spare time, I think the past year has been one of good progress. When I look back there are a number of worthwhile activities in which we have been involved:

* **Training course.** Our 2012 braided river training course was held at Glentui between Sept 25-27. It was attended by 22 people, all of whom thought it was thoroughly worth-while. Without doubt, it is a very good course, thanks largely to the excellent tuition of John Dowding. I am sure it will be the same this year, although we have to do some more work to bring up the number of attendees.
* **Upper Waimakariri survey.** This went ahead between Nov 5-8 last year. It was our second attempt, the first in 2011 having been reduced to a recce survey, thanks to a flooded river. However, last year all went well, despite the weather being a little miserable for the first couple of days. The last two days made up for that, when we walked down the river under blue skies through magnificent country – made even more interesting (for me anyway) by the novelty of having the assistance of a jet boat. All in all, 14 members helped out. The distance covered was 35km. The last time this survey was undertaken was 1995, with 1981 being the time before that. Jim Jolly led the survey, and has produced a very good report in his usual thorough way. As he concluded “The results confirm the continuance of the upper Waimakariri as an important community of riverbed birds, both in numbers and diversity.” Numbers of wrybills (49) were similar to those found in the two previous surveys, but numbers of BFTs and BBGs were lower than in 1995 – BBGs considerably so. As Jim says, we really need 3 successive surveys to get an accurate idea of bird numbers, so we should do a repeat this year. We are applying to ECan for the funding – then it is our challenge to fix a date and get the people to do it. This is quite a commitment for an amateur group such as ourselves.

In Jim’s report, I found the table comparing bird numbers in the upper and lower reaches of the Waimak, the Rangitata and the upper Waitaki particularly interesting. It would be useful to survey the lower Waitaki someday soon. Due to multi-damming in the middle and upper reaches, the lower section is full of weeds, with considerably changed flows and hence it is not nearly so braided as it was. We fear that other rivers could also soon experience major flow changes, leading to considerably reduce bird numbers, but we need data to support that. On the lower Waitaki, perhaps the wading birds are way down, but the more aerial feeders (such as gulls and terns) may be less affected.

* **Co-ordinator appointment.** We advertised this position, and received 3 expressions of interest. The Committee offered the job to Jane Demeter, which she has accepted. The challenge now is to get the funds needed to support the job – an application is in with the Isaac Conservation and Wildlife Trust, plus we are about to send one to the WWF and to the Canterbury Environment Fund. Needless to say, once we get Jane on the road, we will be able to put serious effort into achieving our prime goal of promoting braided river awareness, and improving their numbers of resident birds.
* **Waiau rivercare group up and running.** Even though there were only 8 local people present (plus myself, Jane D and Simon Elkington of DOC) on the cold June 6 evening when the Waiau Rivercare Group held its first gathering (and we showed the BRaid powerpoint), this was a significant event, as it represented the sort of occasion and group which we hope that BRaid can kick-start on other rivers in future years. The Waiau is particularly important as it represents the northern-most river which still has reasonable numbers of the key threatened braided river birds – including the northern-most breeding wrybills. In addition, recent revelations relative to proposed water abstraction for irrigation could mean that flows are drastically reduced to the level that may threaten the future of birds on that river. Which brings me to the CWMS.
* **Canterbury Water Management Strategy.** As just stated, this is reaching the stage when major decisions are being considered by Zone Committees, which could significantly threaten braided river birds. The CWMS document and the ZIPs and DRIPs pay good lip service to environmental conservation and the importance of braided river ecosystems, BUT, threatening positive outcomes in that direction is a not-so-hidden (and Govt driven?) agenda to get as much water as possible for irrigation. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to be confident of facts which support maintaining flows to at least preserve what we have got, but if we do not speak up for that, then we could get into a position of major losses, where there is no possibility of turning back. The opportunities for irrigation will be there forever and a day, but if the birds are lost then they will be gone forever. I attended a Regional Committee meeting on June 25 (and submitted on part of their draft plan), plus Mimouk has helped with getting presentation slots at a number of up-coming Zone meetings. The challenge there, is not just to say how unique are braided river ecosystems and how we must maintain them, but more importantly to give practical suggestions as to how this can be achieved.
* **Conservation Management Strategy (CMS).** Talking of support for braided rivers, the recently released draft CMS for Canterbury for the period 2014-2024, contains heaps of it. Braided rivers feature as a special Place which require ‘specific management direction’. This is the first time that braided rivers have been officially given such a high conservation profile, and this is in a document which sets out to create the rules for conservation management over the next 10 years. The draft CMS is not just the usual list of platitudes, it gives some detail as to where future conservation management should take place. It is open to submission until Sept 13, and we must give it due attention both as a group and as individuals.
* **Important Bird Areas (IBA).** During the year we have been in contact with Chris Gaskin, who is working on creating IBAs in NZ. Overseas, they have legal status in some countries, which gives them extra attention and protection. The concentration is on coastal sites, but as braided rivers are important habitat for many shore birds, they will be included in NZ. We hope to see Chris’s final report soon.
* **DOC’s Technical Action Group on braided rivers.** This met over a year ago, and promised a written strategy by the end of 2012. I have seen a draft, but not the final document. However, with the internal turmoil that currently faces DOC, one must be patient. The goal of writing a strategy was the outcome of a gathering of braided river experts on June 28 last year, during which some very interesting updates were given on the latest findings and research. We need another such update session in the near future – something which we may well discuss later on today.
* **Stuffed animals.** After this AGM we have a general meeting, in which the financial statement will include mention of a DOC grant for some $2k. We were granted this in order to purchase a selection of mounted predators for use with talks to community groups and schools. Specimens of a stoat, weasel, hedgehog and rat are being stuffed in Blenheim as we speak. What we also need is a large wild cat in good condition – dead of course.

Finally, as concluded last year, the profile of braided rivers continues to rise – from just being viewed as sites where we can ‘mine’ water, shingle and recreational pursuits, to recognition of the fact that they hold rare and unique remnants of NZ’s former biodiversity, which will not persist unless we look after them. BRaid is well and truly up and running, and starting to play our part in ensuring the persistence of these endangered ecosystems. And once Jane gets on the road, things should look up even further. In that light, I am really looking forward to the coming year..

Finally, sincere thanks to the small band of keen people that represents BRaid. I always hesitate to name individuals as I am afraid of missing someone. However, our Secretary, Val, deserves special mention, as she has the largest workload, and is efficiency personified. Many thanks to you all.

Nick Ledgard, July 26, 2013