

Mason River – December 2018

The Mason is a foothills-fed river that runs in a north to south direction into the Waiau immediately upstream of the Waiau township – see attached maps. About 6.5km upstream from this confluence the Lottery River runs into the Mason, the former river is significantly larger than the Mason.

Below the Lottery confluence, the Mason would appear to provide good nesting and feeding habitat for braided river birds. This river wouldn't be subject to the large floods in the Waiau that are sourced from rainfall at the main divide. The bed is often 100m or more in width (photo 1) and currently there are few weeds. On the date of the visit in most places there were 1 – 3 actively flowing braids.

Above the Lottery confluence, the Mason narrows significantly, is often flanked by cliffs, in places treetops almost meet over it, and it seems to consist mainly of one channel (photo 2). In places it has gravel bars to about 30m wide. This isn't classic braided river bird habitat. For the 1.5km upstream from the confluence (to Inland Road), the Lottery is also quite narrow and single channel, but further upstream it seems to become more braided – but with weed-covered berms and islands (2015 and 2016 Google Earth images).

In the lowermost few kilometres of the Mason there are several gravel operations, currently mainly just crushing and screening. There seems to be little vehicle access to the riverbed and few 4wd tracks were seen – although a recent flood might have obliterated some. This doesn't appear to be an area with a major human disturbance problem.

I visited the area on behalf of BRaid on 5/12/18 after information obtained from ECan that Henry Pinckney, a very environmentally aware farmer at The Gates property, had seen river birds on his farm. Plans for his farm include regeneration of native bush and planting of new bush and predator trapping along the river and indeed of his entire farm. Henry says he knows of 4 other landowners along the Mason to the Lottery confluence who also would be interested in riverside trapping.

Bird Observations

Henry took me along the river to about 2km upstream from The Gates. In this area in 2017 he saw up to about 40 black-billed gulls and an uncertain number nested here. This year at the start of the breeding season there were around 20 black-fronted terns in the area – but he wasn't aware of them nesting. Pied stilts, pied oystercatchers and paradise ducks also nest in the area. We saw a pair of oystercatchers and a paradise duck.

Best use of the remaining available time was to traverse the Mason from it's mouth as far upstream as possible, which ended up being just short of the Inland Road bridge over the Lottery – a distance of about 7.5km.

Bird life along the river was disappointing. In the lower 1.3km 9 pied stilt, 2 pied oystercatcher and 1 black-backed gull were seen. The behaviour of one of the stilts suggested breeding in the area. Further upstream only two pairs of paradise ducks, with ducklings, were seen.

The lower part of the Mason would appear to be good nesting habitat for banded dotterel, and the other braided river birds. Factors causing the paucity of these birds could include recent flooding, lateness in the breeding season, predation, or a preference for the larger areas of the nearby Waiau. The Mason has similarities with the Kowai - which is a tributary of the Waimakariri. In November 2018 there was a high density of breeding banded dotterel in the Kowai just above it's mouth where they were protected from large floods in the main river.

Henry informed me that there is a cat problem around Waiau township, and there are large numbers of black-backed gulls along the Waiau.

Conclusions

- The lower part of the Mason would appear to be good feeding and breeding habitat for braided river birds. However, other than pied stilt, few were seen. The total absence of banded dotterel was surprising. Predation could be a factor with cats and black-backed gulls perhaps most likely. It would be interesting to revisit this area earlier in the breeding season next year to see if the situation is the same.
- Above the confluence with the Lottery, conditions in both rivers do not represent classic braided river habitat. However, some species do occur and even breed here – with black-billed gulls nesting on the Mason in The Gates property in 2017 and terns seen here in 2018. Any efforts of local farmers to trap the river margins should be encouraged.

G. Davey, 10/12/18



Photo 1. Lower Mason, from Inland Road bridge



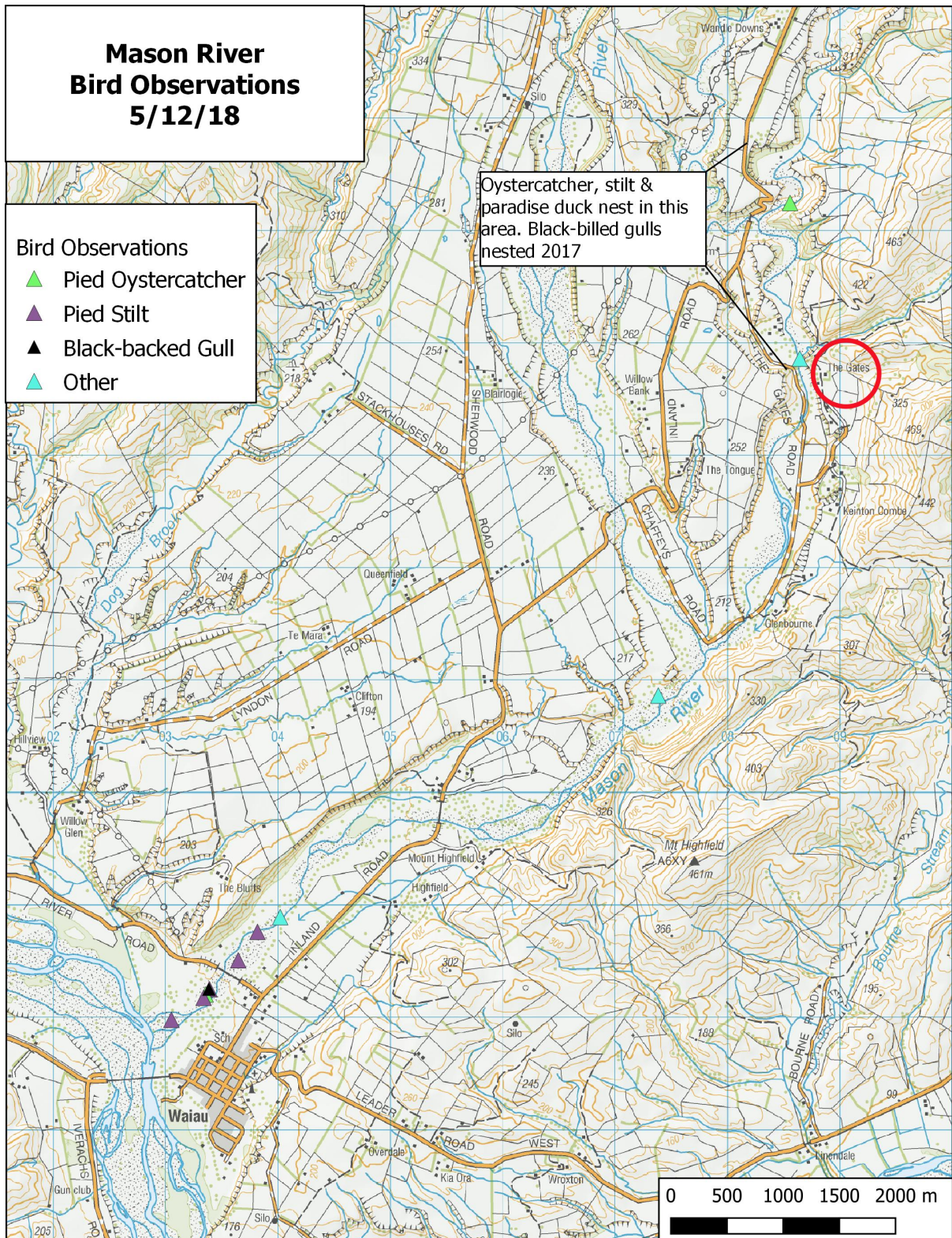
Photo 2. Mason River in The Gates property

Mason River Bird Observations 5/12/18

Bird Observations

- ▲ Pied Oystercatcher
- ▲ Pied Stilt
- ▲ Black-backed Gull
- ▲ Other

Oystercatcher, stilt & paradise duck nest in this area. Black-billed gulls nested 2017



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The Gates

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