

Recce of Black-backed Gull post breeding flock distribution in the coastal Ashburton area, 20 March – 16 April 2022

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Methods

Roads in the Huntingdon, Ashton, Wakanui, Fairton, Dromore, Pendarves, and Dorie localities were traversed during the afternoon and early evenings on five dates between 20 March and 16 April 2022. The general landscape was searched for congregations of Black-backed Gulls. All flocks encountered were mapped on ebird with counts of gulls and other bird species recorded. Habitat characteristics and gull activity at each site was noted and photographed. Birds were counted individually in flocks of <500, with larger flocks block-counted in multiples of 10. Photographs of each flock were taken – generally a “record shot” of part of the flock showing density, activity and habitat.

Survey Effort

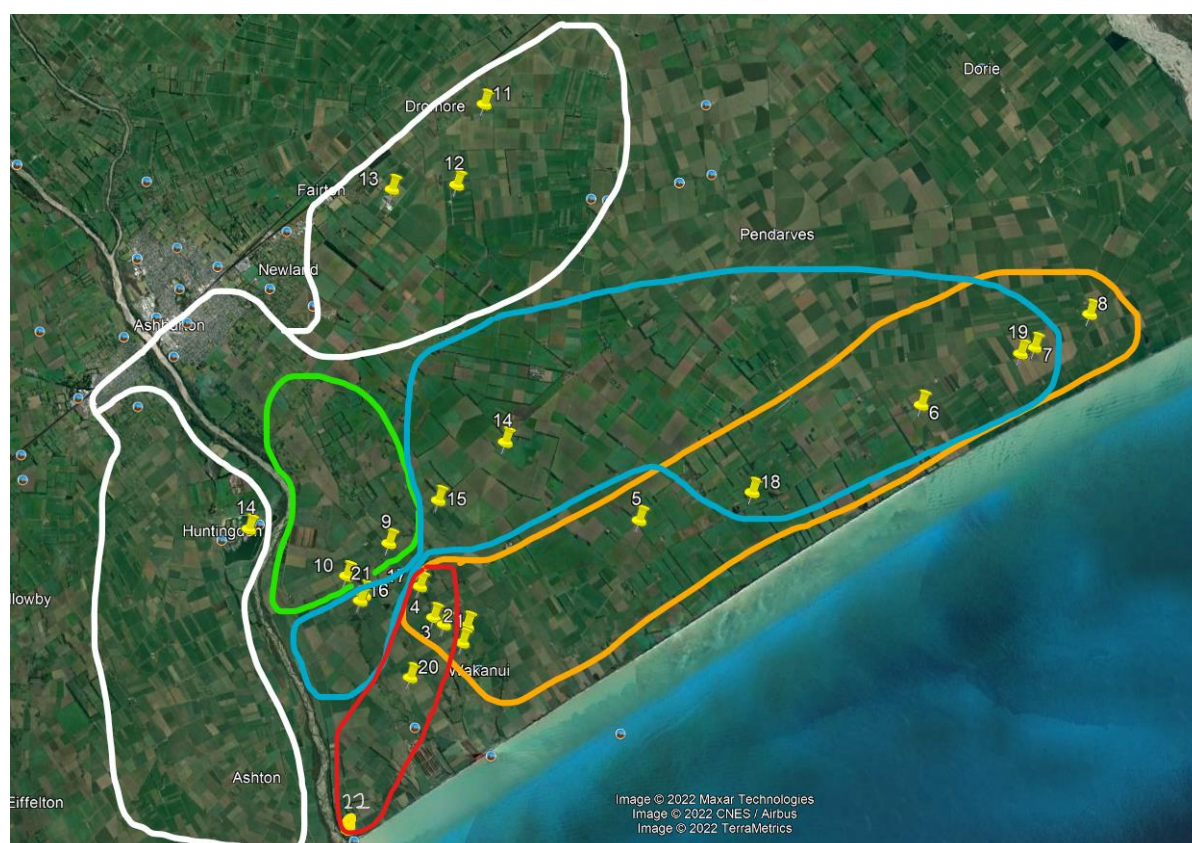
20 March: Coastal farmland between Ashburton RM and Rakaia RM (orange).

30 March: Area between Ashburton and Wakanui school (green).

5 April: Dromore – Fairton area and Tinwald – Lake Hood – Ashton Beach area (white).

11 April: Middle area of farmland from Wakanui to Pendarves and coastal area (blue).

16 April: Wakanui school to Ashburton Rivermouth area (red).



Key Findings

Over the survey period conditions were generally dry and warm with dry firm ground and no ephemeral ponding or wet ground (other than under irrigators).

The farming landscape north-east of the Lower Ashburton River comprised expansive areas of short sward grassland, stubble fields (many of which had been burnt off), ploughed fields with open soil, as well as standing grain, maize and brassica crops, etc.

The landscape south-east of the river seemed to comprise less expansive open areas and more cropping, smaller fields and more tree cover. No gull flocks were observed there.

In terms of suitable habitat, gulls on the north-west side were spoilt for choice with thousands of hectares of farmland to range over. However, large expanses of suitable habitat were in fact devoid of birds and Black-backed Gulls tended to congregate into large groups at a relatively low number of sites. They were clearly very gregarious, with birds forming a feeding or roosting flock together in one spot rather than spreading out at lower densities over identical habitat in the immediate environs.

Flocks of Black-billed Gulls were observed associating with Black-backed Gull flocks at 10 out of 21 sites mapped (almost 50%), as were smaller numbers of other birds that favour similar farmland environments – Spur-winged Plover, Paradise Shelduck, White-faced Heron, Pukeko, Mallard, Feral Rock Pigeons and flocks of Starlings.

Unusually, very few South Island Pied Oystercatcher or Black-fronted Tern were observed within the survey area and no Banded Dotterels were seen. Flocks of Canada Geese also appeared completely absent, except at the Ashburton Rivermouth.

A total of c.11,767 Black-backed Gulls were recorded during the survey. They were present at 20 of 21 sites mapped - the remaining site had a large flock of Black-billed Gulls but no Black-backs at the time surveyed.

10,271 (87%) Black-backed Gulls were either feeding or roosting on recently burnt and/or recently ploughed stubble fields or recently ploughed/seeded bare soil paddocks. Of these, almost half (4417 birds) were closely associating with a tractor while it was actively working in a field.

Most of the remaining Black-backed Gulls observed were near a drinking water source such as water troughs or irrigation systems.

One group of c.380 birds were roosting on the roof of a large food processing plant (Fairton works). Another of 284 were roosting/bathing at the Ashburton Rivermouth Hapua Lagoon.

Very few birds were seen on pasture habitats away from an obvious drinking water source.

Birds were mobile with most movements being either (1) “paddock hopping” from one feeding site to another in close proximity; (2) moving from feeding/roosting areas to a drinking water/bathing source; and, (3) moving across country between feeding areas and the Ashburton Riverbed.

At dusk gulls appeared to be roosting on farmland rather than flying to (safer?) locations in the riverbed or on the coast. This is different to their behaviour during the breeding season.

Recommendations

- In the post-breeding period of March-April, Black-backed Gulls have a strong association with burnt stubble fields in the process of being ploughed or shortly afterwards. It may therefore be possible to work with farmers to co-ordinate ploughing to better plan choice of place and time for any control operations.
- The arrival of non-target species, particularly Black-billed Gull and waterfowl, is a foreseeable risk and a mitigation plan would be needed.
- Surveillance of the whereabouts of both Black-backed Gulls, Black-billed Gulls and waterfowl flocks in the week prior to any control operation is recommended so that the site chosen can be in the vicinity of where Black-backed Gulls are already congregating, but as far away as possible from where Black-billed Gull and waterfowl flocks are located.
- Prior to a control operation, ploughing of burnt stubble fields and bare ground should be co-ordinated between landowners within at least 2000m of the proposed control site to (1) attract Black-backed Gulls into the area, build up numbers and retain them; and (2) to ensure that on the day of control there is no other ploughing activity taking place in the neighbourhood that could draw birds away from the control site.
- Gull distribution is likely to change as the late autumn-winter rains arrive and the stubble burning/ploughing season finishes, so it is recommended that any control activity proposed for May to late July be preceded by a recce of flock locations and behaviour. After late July, Black-backed Gull can be expected to return to riverbed and coastal breeding colony sites for courting and nesting. Many will feed on farmland but depart toward dusk.



20 March 2022 late afternoon

Site 1. 1214 Beach Road, Wakanui

<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S105192764>

SBBG 1660

BbG 550

Notes: Bare paddock with gulls following tractor and plough.



Site 2. 1035-1295 Beach Road, Wakanui

<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S105193022>

SBBG 340

BbG 22

Notes: Grassy paddock. Gulls drinking from four concrete troughs, transiting between feeding area in ploughed paddock and troughs.



Site 3. 1034 – 1296 Beach Road, Wakanui

<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S105193345>

SBBG 260

BbG 32

Notes: Flock roosting in an expansive recently ploughed field.



Site 4. Also 1034 – 1296 Beach Road, Wakanui

<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S105193622>

SBBG 3810

BbG 60

Notes: Very large flock roosting and feeding over recently ploughed portion of an expansive burnt stubble field.



Site 5. 1 – 375 Collisions Road, Wakanui

<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S105194402>

SBBG 420

BbG 490

Notes: Similar-sized Black-backed Gull and Black-billed Gull flocks roosting and feeding together in a bare soil paddock surrounded by pasture and cultivated paddocks.



Site 6. 1 – 341 Lambies Road, Pendarves

<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S105194992>

SBBG 390

BbG 84

Notes: Black-backed Gulls and Black-billed Gulls feeding and roosting together on newly ploughed paddock.



Site 7. 309-601 Lambies Road, Dorie

<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S105195149>

SBBG 110

BbG ---

Notes: Black-backed Gull feeding in wet grassy paddock under irrigator (not working). Nine White-faced Herons also present.



Site 8. Dobsons Ferry Road, Dorie

<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S105195281>

SBBG 190

BbG ---

Notes: Black-backed Gull roosting in dry recently ploughed paddock.



30 March 2022 late afternoon

Site 9. 1-47 Christys Road, Wakanui

<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S105874431>

SBBG 170

BbG ---

Notes: SBBGs feeding and roosting on patchily burnt stubble field.



Site 10. 25-173 Wakanui School Road, Wakanui

<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S105874510>

SBBG 430

BbG ---

Notes: SBBGs feeding and roosting on patchily burnt and partially ploughed stubble field.



5 April 2022 afternoon

Site 11. 56-406 Taverners Road, Dromore

<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S106308578>

SBBG 8

BbG 670

B/F Tern 2

Notes: Large Black-billed Gull flock feeding behind tractor towing a hopper. Only 8 Black-backs present but a large feeding flock of the smaller gulls would likely draw in more Black-backs.



Site 12. 341-427 Stanley Road, Newland

<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S106308722>

SBBG 68

BbG ---

Notes: Flock of Black-backs feeding on wet pasture around active irrigator and flying in to drink on water trough.



Site 13. Fairton Works

<https://ebird.org/newzealand/checklist/S110644673>

SBBG 380

BbG ---

Notes: Black-backed Gulls roosting on roof of industrial site surrounded by farmland.



Site 14. Lake Hood

<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S106310300>

SBBG ---

BbG 2000+

Notes: No Black-backed Gulls observed but a large flock of Black-billed Gulls flying/feeding over the lake and roosting on the shore.



11 April 2022 afternoon

Site 14. 410-688 Christys Road, Wakanui

<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S106764874>

SBBG 2090

BbG 160

Notes: Large flock of Black-backed Gulls with smaller flock of Black-billed Gulls feeding on newly ploughed strips in large burnt stubble paddock. Following tractor as it worked.



Site 15. 180-304 Christys Road, Wakanui

<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S106765040>

SBBG 36

BbG ---

Notes: Smaller group of Black-backed Gulls feeding on corn stubble field as its being ploughed.



Site 16. 280 – 408 Wilsons Road, Wakanui

<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S106765364>

SBBG 140

BbG ---

Notes: Flock of Black-backed Gulls feeding on a ploughed paddock.



Site 17. 853 – 1033 Beach Road, Wakanui

<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S106765584>

SBBG 440

BbG ---

Notes: Black-backed Gulls feeding behind a tractor ploughing in newly ploughed strip.



Site 18. 290 – 612 Buckleys Road, Pendarves

<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S106765939>

SBBG 54

BbG ---

Notes: Small group of Black-backed Gulls feeding on wet grass around small irrigators.



Site 19. 309 – 601 Lambies Road, Dorie

<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S106766192>

SBBG 160

BbG ---

Notes: Flock of Black-backs feeding in wet pasture under irrigators that have recently been turned off. Flock of 22 White-faced Heron associating with the gulls and a herd of cows. Close to site 7.



16 April 2022 **late afternoon**

Site 20. 410-710 Wilsons Road, Wakanui

<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S106764874>

SBBG 44

BbG ---

Notes: Small flock of Black-backed Gulls feeding over newly ploughed field.



Site 21. 480-408 Wilsons Road, Wakanui

<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S107155788>

SBBG 183

BbG ---

Notes: Flock of Black-backed Gulls roosting and feeding over ploughed stubble field behind tractor.



Site 22. Ashburton Rivermouth, Wakanui

<https://ebird.org/atlasnz/checklist/S110723360>

SBBG 284

BbG 290

RbG 48

Notes: This is a count only of gulls at the rivermouth lagoon, mostly roosting in the late afternoon. Birds further upstream on the Ashburton Riverbed were not counted.



