

Ashburton Rivermouth Bird Monitoring

April 2021 – March 2022

Quarterly Report No. 3

(covering October to December 2021)



Prepared for Environment Canterbury

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Summary: October to December 2021

This quarter covers the main part of the breeding season and also the arctic migrant arrival period. Monthly bird counts were undertaken on 22 October, 17 November and 18 December 2021.

Cormorants and Shags

Numbers of **Spotted Shag** at the Ashburton Rivermouth were much higher in Oct-Dec 2021 compared to each of the previous five years. Normally the roosting flocks present over this period comprise mainly juveniles and immature birds, with adults away at breeding colonies on Banks Peninsula. However, during the 2021 breeding season it seems that large numbers of adults apparently abstained from breeding and simply remained at the Ashburton Rivermouth. Much larger numbers of immature birds were also present compared to the very low numbers in both 2019 and 2020.

Fig. 1. *Comparative Spotted Shag numbers, Oct-Dec 2016-2021.*

year	Oct	Nov	Dec
2016	n.d.	480	1490
2017	890	1970	940
2018	24	2080	781
2019	26	94	1390
2020	7	292	660
2021	6481	4080	7372

Curiously, during this period, a proportion (usually several hundred) **Spotted Shags** were observed leaving the rivermouth night roost and flying northward along the beach. Some of these landed on the cliff faces north of the Hakatere settlement. None appeared to be nesting – simply roosting – and most circled then flew further north, but the behaviour is very interesting. These cliffs formerly did in fact support a breeding colony of Spotted Shag some decades ago so its not impossible that some birds may try again to establish a small colony.

Fig.2. *Spotted Shags roosting and landing at dusk on cliffs north of the rivermouth.*



Of the other four cormorant/shag species that regularly occur at the Ashburton Rivermouth, all were elsewhere breeding and the only species observed was **Pied Cormorant**, with 1 in October and 6 in December, mostly immatures.

Waterfowl

Mallard, **Canada Goose** and **Paradise Shelduck** numbers in Oct-Dec 2021 were similar to 2020, but **Grey Teal** numbers were much lower, and no **NZ Shoveler** were observed. **NZ Scaup** reappeared for a second year but only a max. 4 in November. These lower waterfowl numbers are likely a flow-on effect of poor habitat conditions following the winter floods.

Figs 3 & 4. *Monthly totals of waterfowl species, Oct-Dec 2021 c.f. Oct-Dec 2020.*

2021	Oct	Nov	Dec
Canada Goose	17	6	6
Paradise Shelduck	0	1	4
Mallard/Grey Duck	21	27	18
NZ Shoveler	0	0	0
Grey Teal	2	2	19
NZ Scaup	0	4	1
total	40	40	48
2020	Oct	Nov	Dec
Canada Goose	13	10	0
Paradise Shelduck	2	0	5
Mallard/Grey Duck	22	15	21
NZ Shoveler	8	7	0
Grey Teal	47	11	19
NZ Scaup	0	9	12
total	92	52	57

Waders

The low numbers of waders recorded in Jul-Sept 2021 continued through Oct-Dec and overall wader numbers were approximately one-third of what they'd been in the same months during 2020. Particularly affected were **South Island Pied Oystercatcher**, **Banded Dotterel**, **Turnstone** and **Pied Stilt**.

Of note was the arrival of **Grey-tailed Tattlers**, a rare northern Arctic migrant that has been recorded at the Ashburton rivermouth several times before over the last 40 years. Two birds were seen in October and 1 in November.

Fig 5. *Grey-tailed Tattler* (photographed in Java)



Figs. 6 & 7. *Monthly totals of wader species, Oct-Dec 2021 c.f. Oct-Dec 2020.*

2021	Oct	Nov	Dec
SI Pied Oystercatcher	8	7	23
Variable Oystercatcher	2	2	2
Spur-winged Plover	15	4	4
Banded Dotterel	3	12	6
Black-fronted Dotterel	4	2	4
Wrybill	0	2	1
Turnstone	3	3	3
Grey-tailed Tattler	2	0	1
Pied Stilt	15	6	18
total waders	52	38	62
2020	Oct	Nov	Dec
SI Pied Oystercatcher	68	12	18
Variable Oystercatcher	2	2	4
Spur-winged Plover	8	6	18
Banded Dotterel	27	50	72
Black-fronted Dotterel	6	6	7
Wrybill	1	3	7
Bar-tailed Godwit	1	0	1
Turnstone	1	10	9
Pied Stilt	35	21	45
total waders	149	110	181

Gulls and Terns

The large congregation of c.3000 **Black-billed Gulls** observed in September failed to successfully establish a colony and numbers fell to 51 by October, with no nesting occurring this season. Both Black-backed Gull and Red-billed Gull numbers were higher in 2021 than in 2020, but the only breeding observed within the rivermouth study area was 2-3 pairs of Black-backed Gull attending isolated nests.

Tern numbers remained low throughout the breeding season with no White-fronted Tern colony present and much lower numbers of breeding Black-fronted Terns than in 2020. Of note was the presence in December of a single Little Tern, another trans-equatorial migrant from the Northern Hemisphere.

Figs. 8 & 9. *Monthly totals of gull and tern species, Oct-Dec 2021 c.f. 2020.*

2021	Oct	Nov	Dec
Black-backed Gull	332	99	231
Red-billed Gull	106	45	39
Black-billed Gull	51	56	12
Caspian Tern	0	0	5
White-fronted Tern	1	0	63
Black-fronted Tern	5	15	12
Little Tern	0	0	1
2020	Oct	Nov	Dec
Black-backed Gull	80	32	6
Red-billed Gull	21	4	16
Black-billed Gull	78	26	233
Caspian Tern	1	1	1
White-fronted Tern	5	5	24
Black-fronted Tern	32	69	47

Fig. 10. *Little Tern (left) with Black-fronted Terns (photographed at Lake Ellesmere).*



Other species

Four Royal Spoonbills were present in November, increasing to a sizeable flock of 15 in December. They fed both in the lagoon proper and along channels upstream.

No New Zealand Kingfishers were observed, and Welcome Swallow numbers were low (max 18).

October – December 2021 Ashburton Rivermouth count data

	22.10.2021	17.11.2021	18.12.2021
Black Cormorant	0	0	0
Pied Cormorant	1	0	6
Little Cormorant	0	0	0
Spotted Shag	6481	4080	7372
Otago Shag	0	0	0
White-faced Heron	1	0	0
Royal Spoonbill	0	4	15
Mute Swan	0	0	0
Black Swan	0	0	0
Canada Goose	17	6	6
Paradise Shelduck	0	1	4
Mallard/Grey Duck	21	27	18
NZ Shoveler	0	0	0
Grey Teal	2	2	19
NZ Scaup	0	4	1
Swamp Harrier	0	0	0
SI Pied Oystercatcher	8	7	23
Variable Oystercatcher	2	2	2
Spur-winged Plover	15	4	4
Banded Dotterel	3	12	6
Black-fronted Dotterel	4	2	4
Wrybill	0	2	1
Bar-tailed Godwit	0	0	0
Turnstone	3	3	3
Grey-tailed Tattler	2	0	1
Pied Stilt	15	6	18
Arctic Skua	0	0	0
Black-backed Gull	332	99	231
Red-billed Gull	106	45	39
Black-billed Gull	51	56	12
Caspian Tern	0	0	5
White-fronted Tern	1	0	63
Black-fronted Tern	5	15	12
Little Tern	0	0	1
Pukeko	0	0	0
NZ Kingfisher	0	0	0
Welcome Swallow	18	13	8
TOTAL	7088	4390	7874

