

Ashburton Rivermouth Bird Monitoring

April 2024 – March 2025

Quarterly Report No. 4 (January 2025 – March 2025)



Prepared for Environment Canterbury

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Introduction

Wetland/coastal bird surveys were conducted monthly at the Ashburton Rivermouth lagoon and riverbed delta on 22 January, 20 February and 13 March 2025. The March survey was conducted early as I am away overseas from mid March to mid April. Each survey was conducted in the late afternoon to enable accurate and comparable counts of birds settling at their night roosts. These months comprise the peak post-breeding period when many bird species flock at the rivermouth and/or pass through on northward migration. Total bird numbers ranged from 5845 to 6977.

Cormorants and Shags

The 2024-25 breeding season for **Spotted Shag** on Banks Peninsula was a “normal” season and the build-up of post-breeding birds at the Ashburton Rivermouth followed the standard pattern we’ve seen most previous years. Numbers were lower however, which likely reflects the declining size of the source population.

There’s potential for the Ashburton Rivermouth to be added as a study site for some research on **Spotted Shags** in Canterbury involving both an investigation of their diet (through DNZ analysis of scat) and GPS tracking of birds to learn about their movements. I’ll send more information about this at a later date.

Fig 1. *Comparative Spotted Shag numbers Jan-Mar 2017-2025.*

year	Jan	Feb	Mar
2017	n.d.	766	7622
2018	910	6810	7180
2019	1452	2010	7660
2020	458	1453	4376
2021	7096	5379	9770
2022	6272	3150	6497
2023	4830	10570	7371
2024	1030	6706	8560
2025	3550	5060	4646

One **Otago Shag** (a pied morph adult) was observed on the 20 February survey, roosting amongst the Spotted Shag flock on the beach.

All three cormorant species were observed each month, with peaks of 23 **Pied Cormorant** in March, 4 **Little Cormorants** (also in March) , and 2 **Black Cormorants** in February). These are all higher than average numbers for the site.

Fig 2. *Adult and immature Pied Cormorants roosting, 20 February 2025.*



Hérons and Spoonbills

A small flock of Royal Spoonbills was a notable feature of the Ashburton Rivermouth over the summer, building from 4 birds in the January count to 8 in February and 13 in March. There was evidently abundant food as they were seen feeding in all parts of the lagoon, on the delta and on riverbed channels upstream. They were very conspicuous and much talked about by Hakatere locals I met throughout the summer.

Fig 3. *Adult (right) and two immature Royal Spoonbills, 20 February 2025.*



Waterfowl

The post-breeding flocking period saw a build-up in ducks, but unusually small numbers of **Canada Geese** (max 6 in January) were observed. Of the ducks, most abundant were **Grey Teal** (max 341 in March), which down about 150 on the 514 at the same time last year – possibly due to the flood on 13 March survey.

The next most abundant species was **Mallard** (87 in March), followed by **Paradise Shelduck** (max. 14 in Feb) and **New Zealand Scaup** (8 in March). Also present were 7 **Black Swan** in February (4 remaining in March) and 2 **Australasian Shoveler** in both January and March.

Fig 4. *Grey Teal showing two of their diagnostic ID features red eyes and pale cheeks.*



Waders

Feeding and roosting habitat for waders was ideal in January and February, but flooding on the 13 March survey covered the mudflats around the lagoon and the lower part of the delta with few waders present. Post-breeding flocking by **Banded Dotterel** followed the usual seasonal pattern with the peak count of 97 in January being second only in this nine-year series of surveys to a count of 122 on February 2017. The flood on 13 March submerged much of the favoured dotterel habitat and only 5 birds were seen.

Fig 5. *Banded Dotterels, February 2025.*



Fig 6. *Banded Dotterel post-breeding flocking numbers Jan-Mar 2017-2025*

year	Jan	Feb	Mar
2017	n.d.	122	7
2018	9	6	14
2019	63	43	54
2020	43	26	67
2021	30	54	2
2022	49	39	12
2023	64	79	54
2024	73	7	4
2015	97	89	5

Pied Stilt numbers were slightly higher than most previous years with a peak of 54 counted in February. These were less impacted by the March fresh than the other waders and 32 were still present on 13 March.

Numbers of **Spur-winged Plover** (max.52), **Black-fronted Dotterel** (max. 8), **South Island Pied Oystercatchers** (max. 22), Variable Oystercacher (max. 2) and **Wrybill** (1 in January and February) were all present in similar numbers to previous years. Numbers of all were low in March.

Northern Hemisphere migrants included **Turnstones** (4 in January and February), and a single **Pectoral Sandpiper** in February.

Fig 7. *Black-fronted Dotterel*



Gull species

Sizeable numbers of **Black-billed Gulls** were present at the rivermouth through January (756 birds), February (410) and March (1232), but no evidence of breeding was observed on the survey dates. If any late attempt occurred between visits it was quickly washed away by freshes.

Red-billed Gull numbers were lower than in previous years with 33 counted on the January survey and 51 in both February and March. No breeding activity was observed.

Southern Black-backed Gull numbers were typical for the time of year with a max. 268 counted in March, of which more than half were recently fledged juveniles.

Skua and Tern species

This year has seen good numbers of terns at the Ashburton Rivermouth with five species recorded. The post-breeding flock of **Black-fronted Terns** reached an impressive 164 birds in March with sizeable numbers recorded in January and February also. This included at least 40% juveniles. With a World population estimated at 5-10,000 birds and counts as high as 265 birds (May 2020), the Ashburton Rivermouth qualifies as an Internationally Significant post-breeding site for this species (Under Ramsar Convention 1% criterion).

Fig 8. *Comparative Black-fronted Tern numbers Jan-Mar 2017-2025.*

year	Jan	Feb	Mar
2017	n.d.	87	5
2018	14	8	3
2019	24	66	6
2020	42	25	33
2021	48	24	3
2022	6	82	7
2023	31	63	44
2024	115	10	21
2025	102	79	164

White-fronted Tern numbers peaked at 864 on 22 January with birds congregating on the spit at the Ashton Beach end where they had been observed mating on the 21 December count. It was not clear from the Hakatere side on 22 January if any were actually nesting – the vast majority were clearly roosting only. Numbers had declined to 78 by 20 February and 32 by 13 March, indicating that if a limited nesting attempt had taken place, it had not persisted long.

A single **White-winged Black Tern** (adult in non-breeding plumage) was seen in February, and a single **Little Tern** was seen in company of Black-fronted Terns fishing over the lagoon and off the beach in March. A single pale-morph **Arctic Skua** was present on the January

survey, chasing terns and gulls. All three of these Northern-Hemisphere species have been recorded visiting the Ashburton Rivermouth in recent years.

The migration passage of **Caspian Terns** moving from their major breeding colony near Invercargill northwards up the east coast saw the usual influx at the Ashburton Rivermouth with a max. 21 birds counted in the March survey. This is the second highest post-breeding flock seen over nine years of rivermouth surveys.

Fig 9. 14 of 21 Caspian Terns roosting together on 13 March 2025.



Fig 10. Comparative Caspian Tern numbers Jan-Mar 2017-2025

year	Jan	Feb	Mar
2017	n.d.	8	11
2018	8	7	25
2019	1	2	4
2020	3	4	2
2021	0	5	19
2022	10	18	1
2023	14	18	4
2024	2	16	3
2025	9	17	21

Other species

A pair of **Swamp Harriers** were seen in February and a single harrier in March causing mayhem when they hunted over the lagoon and delta.

A lone **NZ Kingfisher** was recorded in March.

Welcome Swallow numbers fluctuated as is typical for the site, with up to 45 counted in February.

Survey Data: January to March 2025

species	22.1.2025	20.2.2025	13.3.2025
Black Cormorant	1	2	1
Pied Cormorant	8	14	23
Little Cormorant	2	2	4
Spotted Shag	3550	5060	4646
Otago Shag	0	1	0
White-faced Heron	1	1	0
Royal Spoonbill	4	8	13
Black Swan	0	7	4
Canada Goose	6	1	0
Paradise Shelduck	9	14	2
Mallard/Grey Duck	8	16	87
Australasian Shoveler	2	0	2
Grey Teal	79	33	341
NZ Scaup	5	5	8
Swamp Harrier	0	2	1
SI Pied Oystercatcher	23	22	1
Variable Oystercatcher	1	2	2
Spur-winged Plover	45	52	22
Banded Dotterel	97	89	5
Black-fronted Dotterel	8	4	4
Wrybill	1	1	0
Turnstone	4	4	0
Pectoral Sandpiper	0	1	0
Pied Stilt	44	54	32
Arctic Skua	1	0	0
Black-backed Gull	165	134	268
Red-billed Gull	33	51	51
Black-billed Gull	756	410	1232
Caspian Tern	9	17	21
White-fronted Tern	864	78	32
Black-fronted Tern	102	79	164
White-winged Black Tern	0	1	0
Little Tern	0	0	1
NZ Kingfisher	0	0	1
Welcome Swallow	17	45	9
Totals	5845	6210	6977

