

Ashburton Rivermouth Hapua

**Bird Monitoring Report for year April
2025 to March 2026**



Prepared for Environment Canterbury

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Introduction

The Ashburton Rivermouth/Hāpua is a regionally and nationally significant coastal wetland that supports a diverse assemblage of riverbed, wetland, and coastal bird species. Monthly bird surveys are undertaken to monitor seasonal and inter-annual population trends, while also providing valuable information to guide wildlife conservation and habitat management at the site.

This is the ninth annual report on the monitoring of wetland and coastal bird populations at the Ashburton Rivermouth/Hāpua, commissioned by Environment Canterbury (ECan). The report presents bird count data and summarises survey findings for the 12-month period from April 2025 to March 2026. Surveys were undertaken on the following dates: 24 April 2025, 16 May, 25 June, 30 July, 26 August, 24 September, 29 October, 27 November, 18 December, 28 January, 24 February, and 16 March 2026.

Study Area

The same study area was surveyed as in all previous years to ensure consistency and comparability of results. The Ashburton Rivermouth study area encompasses the shingle spits at the rivermouth, the river discharge zone and lagoon (hāpua), the river delta flowing into the lagoon, and the braided riverbed upstream to a point opposite the northern-most houses of the Hakatere settlement (Figure 1).

This area includes the principal near-coastal habitats where riverbed and coastal bird species congregate to feed, roost, and, in some years, breed. Large breeding colonies may occur within the study area during favourable seasons. Further upstream, bird communities are dominated by riverbed species, while flocking and communal night-roosting behaviour—other than at breeding colonies—becomes progressively less frequent.



Figure 1. Survey observation points (yellow dots) and GPS-tracking showing a typical route (blue line).

Survey Methodology

Survey methods replicated those used in all preceding years. A comprehensive census of riverbed, wetland, and coastal birds within the study area was conducted once per month ($n = 12$). Surveys commenced approximately 2–3 hours before sunset to ensure consistent counts of species that typically reach their highest local abundance at dusk.

Species such as shags, cormorants, gulls, terns, and waders move between the rivermouth, adjacent marine waters, upstream river habitats, and surrounding farmland throughout the day. Prior to sunset, however, many individuals return to communal roost sites, enabling accurate counts of the resident population.

All surveys were undertaken by the author using Zeiss or Kowa 10×42 binoculars and a Nikon $20-60 \times 80$ spotting scope. A Canon camera with $200\times$ zoom capability was used to photograph large bird flocks and document incidental species records. Census procedures were consistent with those used in previous years and followed the guidelines outlined in Howes and Bakewell (1989), *Shorebird Studies Manual* (Asian Waterfowl Bureau).

Bird counts were conducted from elevated vantage points on the cliffs overlooking the rivermouth (Figure 2). Whenever river conditions permitted, a standardised survey transect was also walked through the study area. This route crossed the delta on the landward side of the lagoon and proceeded upstream in a series of zig-zag stages (Figure 1).

During each survey, all roosting, feeding, and rafting bird aggregations were systematically scanned and counted. Individual birds were counted wherever practicable. For large congregations exceeding 2,000 individuals, block-counting techniques using multiples of ten birds were employed. Very large flocks of Spotted Shags were photographed and subsequently counted from enlarged digital images.

Data gaps

At dynamic sites such as the Ashburton Rivermouth, the occurrence of many bird species is highly transient. Individuals and flocks frequently move along the coastline or up and down the river system, while habitat conditions can change rapidly in response to river flows, tidal inundation, human disturbance, and other environmental factors. Consequently, bird numbers may fluctuate more markedly than at more stable habitats such as coastal lakes, lagoons and estuaries.

The monthly bird monitoring survey programme provides robust information on the seasonal abundance and long-term trends of monitored species. However, as surveys were conducted only once per month, some limitations are unavoidable. Uncommon species that arrive and depart between survey dates may not be detected, and short-term peaks in abundance of regularly occurring species may also be missed. These factors should be considered when interpreting the results presented in this report.



Figure 2. Thousands of Spotted Shag line the River mouth channel and shingle spit, 24 February 2026.

River Flows and Habitat Condition

The following summarises habitat condition and river flow (measured as mean discharge at the S.H/W 1 Bridge at 16:00 hrs). Data kindly provided by T. Grey, ECAN.

24 April 2025 *40.025 m³/s* *4295 birds* *20 wetland bird species*

River in small flood after 4 days of rain. Lagoon level high with limited mudflat but extensive shingle delta. Both north and south arms full. Discharge channel breaching the shingle spit at the extreme northern end.



16 May 2025 *35.560 m³/s* *11,095 birds* *18 species*

Flood in river. Main channel cutting into base of cliff and bypassing seaward side of the lagoon, which retains mudflat/shingle islands. North lagoon full. The shingle spit pushed seaward and the mouth located opposite the lower huts.



25 June 2025 *74.429 m³/s* *7620 birds* *12 species*

River has been in flood and still high. Mouth located opposite the main stem with the river discharging directly into the sea. North arm largely dewatered, exposing extensive mudflats and shingle.



30 July 2025 *29.805 m³/s* *10,726 birds* *18 species*

Lagoon full, with mudflats and delta islands fully inundated. Narrow outlet channel open at southern end.



26 August 2025 *16.088 m³/s* *559 birds* *16 species*

Mouth opposite main stem. Wide clean mudflats and delta islands. North arm full and impounded.



24 September 2025 *68.088 m³/s* *3018 birds* *21 species*

River in small flood after a larger 360 cumec flood < 1 week ago. Mouth opposite main stem with most flow discharging directly to the sea. Mudflats on northern side. North arm comprises mudflats and shallow residual ponds. 10 white-baiters fishing and evidence of recent motorbike activity on mudflats.



29 October 2025 *30.417 m³/s* *1007 birds* *22 species*

River in small flood after several recent large floods. Main river channels converging and exiting to the sea via a long parallel channel. Mudflats on north side with residual ponding in north arm and a narrow connecting channel.



27 November 2025 *14.760 m³/s* *1119 birds* *23 species*

Low river level with outlet via a parallel channel in the spit. Extensive mudflats and shingle delta islands.



18 December 2025 *12.504 m³/s* *1446 birds* *25 species*

River has dropped after a flood over the preceding two days. Lagoon and both arms full but with extensive mudflats and shingle islands on the landward side.



28 January 2026 *49.195 m³/s* *6854 birds* *28 species*

River in flood with mouth discharging opposite the road-end cliff via a parallel channel. Main lagoon full but mudflats line both the northern and southern edges. North arm full and cut off from main lagoon by mudflats. Many bird species present.



24 February 2026 *25.935 m³/s* *7241 birds* *24 species*

New mouth breaching the spit c.100m south of the road-end cliff. River discharging directly to sea. Mudflats and shingle delta islands on both sides of the lagoon. North arm and south arm are both disconnected from the river and partly dry.



16 March 2026 *14.940 m³/s* *8010 birds* *23 species*

Mouth almost closed to sea with a shallow, narrow outlet channel seeping through the beach opposite the road-end cliff. Lagoon flooded . Mudflats and most of the shingle delta islands are inundated.



Key Findings

During the 2025–26 monitoring year, a total of 33 riverine, wetland, and coastal bird species were recorded at the Ashburton Rivermouth. Monthly species richness ranged from a high of 28 species in January to a low of 12 in June (Table 1). The annual total of 33 species falls within the mid-range of the 30–35 species recorded during the nine years of monitoring undertaken to date (Table 2).

Total monthly bird numbers (all species combined) varied markedly throughout the year, ranging from peaks of 11,095 in May and 10,726 in July 2025 to a low of 559 individuals in August 2025 to (Table 1).

No new species were recorded during the 2025–26 surveys. However, a member of the public photographed a Subantarctic (Brown) Skua resting on the beach near the rivermouth in April 2025, representing a new species record for the site. As a result, the site bird checklist now stands at c.84 species.

Table 1. Number of species recorded and total birds counted each month from April 2025 to March 2026.

Month	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
No. species per month	20	18	12	18	16	21	22	23	25	28	24	23
total	4295	11095	7620	10726	559	3018	1007	1119	1446	6854	7241	8010

Table 2. Total number of bird species recorded 2017 to 2026, with the average number of species per month and the annual range of count totals.

Year	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025	2025-2026
Total no. species recorded	30	34	33	35	34	33	35	35	33
Average species recorded per month	19.2	21.9	20.5	23.6	19.8	19.3	19.5	23.8	20.8
Monthly totals range	1253 – 13,583	2812 – 9386	520 – 10,044	498 – 11,554	3901 – 12,210	1331 – 11,133	1552 – 11,410	627 – 10,827	559 – 11,095

As in previous years, **Spotted Shag** was by far the most abundant species, reaching a maximum count of 10,423 individuals in July 2025.

Ten other species exceeded 50 individuals during at least one monthly survey: **Black-billed Gull** (maximum 2,510 in September), **Southern Black-backed Gull** (524 in October); **White-fronted Tern** (516 in November); **Red-billed Gull** (310 in April), **Black-fronted Tern** (182 in April), **Mallard** (159 in April), **Grey Teal** (97 in March), **Pied Stilt** (84 in May), **Canada Goose** (64 in March), and **Spur-winged Plover** (58 in April).

Species Accounts

Gannets, cormorants and shags

No **Australasian Gannets** were observed during the April 2025 – March 2026 bird surveys.

Spotted Shag numbers varied greatly the breeding and non-breeding seasons. In the 2025 – 2026 breeding season the Banks Peninsula colonies had their full complement of adults and very few birds (mostly immatures) remained at the Ashburton Rivermouth over the months August to November. The good news is that there was no-large abstaining from breeding by adult shags, but the bad news is that the large flocks of immature birds that we've seen waiting out the breeding season at the Ashburton Rivermouth in the past were reduced down to only a few dozen birds. This is of conservation concern as it may mean that breeding success and survival of fledglings from the past few breeding seasons has been very low. **Spotted Shag** numbers at the Ashburton Rivermouth from summer into autumn and winter (when adults are away from the peninsula breeding grounds) were similar to other years and exceeded 1000 individuals in seven of twelve months (table 3). Peak numbers of 9984 **Spotted Shags** in May and 10,423 in July both closely approximate to peaks in previous years (table 4).

Table 3. Monthly count data for cormorants and shags, 2025 – 2026.

Month	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Black Cormorant	0	2	0	1	0	0	2	0	2	3	2	0
Pied Cormorant	19	17	11	13	2	7	9	20	25	5	11	6
Little Cormorant	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	4	2	3	6
Spotted Shag	3104	9984	6893	10423	14	8	56	36	462	5110	6654	6620
Otago Shag	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

No **Otago Shags** were observed in any month in 2025 – 2026 which seems to indicate that this species has now fully pivoted toward Timaru Harbour as its Canterbury Bight core roosting location rather than the Ashburton Rivermouth.

Pied Cormorants continue to build up their population at the Ashburton Rivermouth with the species recorded each month of the year for the first time and peaking at 25 birds in December - the second-highest count in nine years of surveys, just behind the 26 recorded in February 2023. The species has still not started nesting locally but this is surely just a matter of time?

Little Cormorants were observed in six out of 12 months with the highest number being six birds in March.

Black Cormorants were present in six out of 12 months with the highest count being three in January 2026.

Numbers of both species have been relatively consistent from year to year.

Table 4. Highest count per year for cormorant and shag species, 2017-18 to 2025-26.

Year	2017-2018	2018 - 2019	2019 - 2020	2020 - 2021	2021 - 2022	2022 - 2023	2023 - 2024	2024 - 2025	2025 - 2026
Black Cormorant	2	2	6	3	4	2	1	2	3
Pied Cormorant	12	8	11	24	21	26	13	23	25
Little Cormorant	3	4	1	2	1	3	2	4	6
Spotted Shag	7180	8130	9190	9980	10,841	10,570	10,132	9270	10,423
Otago Shag	1	9	2	4	3	2	2	1	0

**Figure 3:** Part of the 9900-strong Spotted Shag roosting flock on the evening of 16 May 2026.



Figure 4: An example of how large Spotted Shag flocks are counted from photographs – each 100-strong block of birds is counted by marking each individual bird in a single colour. Each set of 100 birds is marked in a different colour and so on.....

Herons and Spoonbills

White-faced Herons were recorded in seven of 12 months, with two in July, February and March (table 5).

Royal Spoonbills were recorded over the breeding season from October to February and may have involved nomadic birds moving along the coast, or visitors from upstream on the Ashburton River where pairs have been recorded breeding in the recent past.

Table 5. Monthly count data for herons and spoonbills , 2025 – 2026.

Month	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
White-faced Heron	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	1	1	1	2	2
Royal Spoonbill	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	2	5	1	0



Figure 5: One of the two regular White-faced Herons.

Waterfowl

A negative impact of the frequent floods and high flows in the Ashburton River during 2025 – 2026 was that waterfowl numbers were well down on previous years. The three highest monthly totals of all waterfowl combined (184 in April, 203 in May and 187 in March) were much less than previous peak counts of 469 birds in 2024-26, 799 birds in 2023-24, 817 in 2022-23, 1054 in 2021-22 and 1393 in 2020-21.

Table 6. Monthly count data for waterfowl, 2025 – 2026.

Month	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Black Swan	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Canada Goose	0	16	0	0	0	0	0	9	36	7	0	64
Paradise Shelduck	8	0	0	2	4	5	4	4	2	2	14	18
Mallard/Grey hybrid	159	90	16	24	31	11	7	18	6	26	22	43
Australasian Shoveler	0	0	0	12	0	0	11	0	0	3	0	0
Grey Teal	10	97	62	2	14	6	2	2	10	36	19	62
New Zealand Scaup	4	0	0	0	0	2	2	5	0	2	0	0
Total	184	203	78	40	49	24	26	38	54	76	55	187

Grey Teal were present during all twelve months but were far less numerous than they'd been previously (Table 6) . The highest count was 97 in May - a fraction of the 1330 present in May 2020 (table 7)

[footnote: habitat conditions improved after the close of this 12-month survey period and the total counted in the May 2026 survey was 521 Grey Teal].

The most abundant waterfowl species in 2025 – 2026 was **Mallard/Grey hybrid** which were also present every month and peaked at 159 in April 2025. Several pairs successfully nested successfully in the lagoon and lower river, including a pair of Grey Duck-like hybrids.

Third most abundant were **Canada Geese** with a peak count of 64 in March 2026. Numbers were higher than the peak count of 44 in 2024-2025, but still much lower than observed in most previous years (c.f. peak counts of 209 in 2023-24; 342 in 2022-23; 149 in 2021-22 and 242 in 2020-21 (Table 6). Once again, a small number of goose pairs nested in the study area.

Paradise Shelduck were recorded in ten out of 12 months with the highest total of 18 being comparable to numbers recorded in the last two years, although lower than most years prior to that.

Black Swans were only observed once – three birds in April 2025. They are an irregular visitor to the site.

New Zealand Scaup were present in six out of 12 months, with a max. 5 birds counted in November. This species is a local nomad with birds presumably moving back and forth to the large population that resides on Lake Hood.

Table 7. Highest count per year for waterfowl species, 2017-18 to 2025-26.

Year	2017-2018	2018 - 2019	2019 - 2020	2020 - 2021	2021 - 2022	2022 - 2023	2023 - 2024	2024 - 2025	2025 - 2026
Mute Swan	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Black Swan	0	4	3	3	3	5	0	7	3
Canada Goose	262	254	190	242	149	342	209	44	64
Paradise Shelduck	4	11	51	22	23	57	16	14	18
Mallard/Grey hybrid	158	107	195	157	243	169	131	132	159
Australasian Shoveler	2	4	7	8	36	5	32	4	12
Grey Teal	78	92	213	1330	846	674	514	341	97
Chestnut Teal	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
New Zealand Scaup	0	3	0	12	4	2	0	18	5



Figure 6: A pair of Grey Teal and a Variable Oystercatcher feeding near the toe of the road-end cliff, 24 September 2025.

Birds of Prey and Skuas

Swamp Harriers were recorded in six of 12 months with 1-3 birds seen. This involved a pair, with the third bird possibly being a fledged juvenile. Harriers were seen feeding on avian prey (ducks) on at least two dates and were clearly perceived as predators by most other bird species present, frequently causing flocks of waterfowl, waders, terns and gulls to take flight.

A single **Arctic Skua** was recorded in March, although others no visited between count dates over summer.

Table 8. Monthly count data for birds of prey and skuas , 2025 – 2026.

Month	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Swamp Harrier	2	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	3	3	1
Arctic Skua	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1



Figure 7: A Swamp Harrier feeding on the remains of a Grey Teal at the edge of the lagoon on 24 April 2025.



Figure 8: Two photos of an Arctic Skua pursuing terns just off the rivermouth on 16 March 2026.

One additional skua species, **Subantarctic (Brown) Skua**, was discovered and photographed by a member of the public in April 2025. This bird was not present on survey dates and was likely a tired temporary visitor having a rest. Subantarctic Skuas breed around Stewart Island and on the Subantarctic Islands, visiting the mainland coasts in small numbers during the non-breeding season.



Figure 9: Subantarctic (Brown) Skua, April 2025. Posted by © J Newton on facebook.com.

Waders

Eight wader species were recorded at the Ashburton Rivermouth in the 2025 – 2026 year with the highest combined counts being 144 in May and 115 in January (table 9). This is much lower than comparative totals for most previous years (for example, wader numbers peaked at 229 in 2024 – 2025). Frequent floods reduced availability of favourable feeding habitat for waders and presumably negatively impacted food resources. The post-breeding flocking usually seen in January-February did not feature this year for the majority of species.

South Island Pied Oystercatcher numbers peaked at 45 in May and 49 for a brief period in January, but were very low in other months (table 9). Numbers were comparable to the max. 40 recorded in 2024 – 2025, but much lower than peak numbers recorded in 2023- 2024 (84) and 2022 - 2023 (60) (table 2).

Variable Oystercatchers (max. 3) included a semi-resident pair that probably attempted nesting in January but without evidence of success. Only one of the pair was seen in February, then neither bird in March.



Figure 10: Suspected Variable Oystercatcher nest location (circled) on the beach, 28 January 2026.

Table 9. Monthly count data for waders, 2025 – 2026.

Month	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
SI Pied Oystercatcher	2	45	4	4	2	10	3	4	13	49	5	0
Variable Oystercatcher	2	2	2	2	3	2	0	0	0	2	1	0
Spur-winged Plover	58	11	2	12	2	4	2	8	6	17	18	44
Banded Dotterel	0	0	0	0	0	9	16	16	15	26	29	2
Black-fronted Dotterel	4	2	0	0	2	2	2	4	4	2	5	2
Wrybill	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0
Turnstone	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	24	6	2	0
Pied Stilt	24	84	0	4	2	16	2	4	10	13	3	16
Total	90	144	8	22	11	43	26	38	74	115	63	64

After the high number of **Banded Dotterels** in post-breeding flocks in 2024 – 2025 (97 in January and 89 in February 2025), numbers seen at the Ashburton Rivermouth this year were substantially lower. The highest count was just 29 birds in February 2026, with none observed on survey dates from April to September, and only small numbers thereafter. Displacement by flooding and reduced high quality food resources seem the likely reasons.



Figure 11: Flooding temporarily inundates wader habitat and displaces birds. Once floods recede, they leave silty mudflats, bare shingle islands and shallow riffles which quickly develop into rich feeding habitat. Unfortunately, if floods are frequent (like they were in 2025 – 2026), food resources like invertebrate populations don't have time to rebuild between floods.

During spring, nesting attempts by **Banded Dotterels** were also impacted by the regular flooding and only a handful of pairs bred – mostly along the beach. Breeding season numbers were the second lowest (after 2021) recorded in the nine years of monitoring.

Human disturbance on the lagoon edge may also have been an issue during the breeding season. White-baiters, motorbikes and even jet boats were reported by local Hakatere Huts residents as active in the area (Figure 12).



Figure 12: Clusters of white-baiters fishing around the lagoon and motorcycle tracks showing evidence of recent 'hoon' activity, 24 September 2025.

Pied Stilt numbers during the breeding season were also at the low end of the range recorded over the past nine years, but were comparable to 2018, 2021, 2022 and 2024. Again, the frequent flooding seems to have reduced the suitability of the lagoon edge and lower river braids for nesting by this species. A large flock of 84 **Pied Stilt** on the May 2025 survey was a record total for these surveys (table 10), but as with most other waders, the sizeable post-breeding flocks usually seen in January and February failed to eventuate in late summer 2026 (table 2).

Spur-winged Plover was the only wader species for which post-breeding flocks made a solid appearance – peaking at 58 birds in April 2025 and 44 in March 2026. The species was present every month, but usually in numbered less than 20 individuals.

Less common native waders included **Black-fronted Dotterels** (max. 5, recorded in 10 of 12 months); and **Wrybill** (1 bird in October and 2 in December) with no nesting detected this year.

Numbers of the Arctic-breeding **Turnstone** were higher than usual with two appearing in November, increasing to 24 in December. On 18 December they were dispersed into three feeding flocks on the upper delta and lower riverbed - all visible at the same time from the cliff top. This is the largest number I've seen at the Ashburton Rivermouth in the nine years of monitoring, although I'd previously counted 24 on 10 February 2003 and other observers have reported occasional flocks of >20 in some past years.



Figure 13: Two of three Turnstone flocks totalling 24 birds at the Ashburton Rivermouth on 18 December 2025.

Table 10. Highest count per year for wader species, 2017-18 to 2025-26.

Year	2017- 2018	2018 - 2019	2019 - 2020	2020 - 2021	2021 - 2022	2022 - 2023	2023 - 2024	2024 - 2025	2025 - 2026
SI Pied Oystercatcher	7	48	63	68	46	60	84	40	49
Variable Oystercatcher	4	11	4	4	3	3	2	4	3
Spur-winged Plover	57	27	55	18	53	94	35	52	58
Banded Dotterel	43	63	67	72	49	79	73	97	29
Black-fronted Dotterel	5	5	7	10	9	9	9	9	5
Wrybill	3	4	6	7	2	2	1	4	2
Pied Stilt	25	32	44	45	45	66	42	68	84
Turnstone	2	4	16	13	3	1	22	4	24
Bar-tailed Godwit	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Grey-tailed Tattler	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
Pectoral Sandpiper	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0

Gulls

Southern Black-backed Gull numbers vary throughout the day with birds returning to either the rivermouth or colony sites upriver to roost at dusk. In the April 2025 – March 2026 monitoring period, highest numbers were recorded in May (474 birds) and October (525) (table 11). These maximum counts were generally comparable to numbers seen throughout the nine years of monitoring, except for 2023 – 2024 when much larger numbers were recorded (table 12). The large breeding colony in the lower river, located approx. 1.3 km above the top of the study area, was fully active in spring 2025 with many birds over-flying the rivermouth at dusk on their way to this colony. No **Southern Black-backed Gulls** were observed nesting around the lagoon or delta.

Table 11. Monthly count data for gulls, 2025 – 2026.

Month	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Southern Black-backed Gull	86	478	68	32	224	377	524	176	214	312	42	131
Red-billed Gull	310	227	51	0	11	29	1	21	36	145	66	54
Black-billed Gull	287	28	498	180	236	2510	340	241	158	596	22	795
Total	683	733	617	212	471	2916	865	438	408	1053	130	980

Red-billed Gulls were present for 11 out of 12 months, with maximum numbers recorded in April and May 2025 (table 11). Very few birds were present during the breeding season months, but post-breeding flocks appeared in January. Most Red-bills feed around the mouth and along the surf zone or scavenge around the large flocks of roosting Spotted Shag. No mating or nesting was observed at the Ashburton Rivermouth in 2025 -2026.

Like Spotted Shag, the seasonal influxes of **Red-billed Gull** flocks are presumed to originate from the breeding colonies on Banks Peninsula, although some may come from source areas more distant such as the large breeding colonies on both the Kaikoura and Otago coastlines.



Figure 13: Red-billed Gulls, 24 April 2025.

Table 12. Highest count per year for gull species, 2017-18 to 2025-26.

Year	2017-2018	2018 - 2019	2019 - 2020	2020 - 2021	2021 - 2022	2022 - 2023	2023 - 2024	2024 - 2025	2025 - 2026
Sth Black-backed Gull	508	294	301	890	553	743	1555	268	524
Red-billed Gull	110	364	395	338	410	276	405	251	310
Black-billed Gull	8798	7182	3240	410	3043	344	930	1354	2510

Black-billed Gulls were present in all months with numbers building up to 2510 on the 24 September 2025 survey. Large numbers congregated on low-lying islands in the delta above the lagoon and engaged in courtship behaviour, mating and the beginnings of nest-building. They appeared to be settled and in the early stages of establishing a colony but were evidently hit by a succession of floods over subsequent weeks and abandoned any breeding attempt. By late October only 340 birds remained and all nesting activity had ceased. Numbers at the rivermouth increased again in late summer with notable post-breeding flocking observed in January and March.

Terns

Five tern species were recorded at the Ashburton Rivermouth in 2025-2026 with seasonal patterns and numbers similar to most previous years.

A record 37 **Caspian Terns** counted in February marked the arrival of a large post-breeding flock that remained in sizeable numbers through until late March. The previous highest counts were 25 in March 2018 and 21 in March 2025. **Caspian Terns** were recorded every month except June and November (Table 13).

**Figure 14:** Just over half the flock of 29 Caspian Terns roosting on the delta on the afternoon of 16 March 2026.

Table 13. Monthly count data for terns, 2025 – 2026.

Month	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Caspian Tern	5	2	0	1	5	1	3	0	4	9	37	29
White-fronted Tern	4	1	0	0	1	1	2	516	368	430	230	44
Black-fronted Tern	182	0	0	4	0	8	10	13	19	33	46	40
Common Tern	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
White-winged Back Tern	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Total	191	3	0	5	6	10	15	530	392	472	313	114

A sizeable flock of **White-fronted Terns** (max. 516 in November) was present right through the breeding season months. They roosted on the beach as well as on islands within the lagoon and delta. Although mating was observed in November, nothing eventuated and the flock reduced in size from 430 in December to 230 in January, 44 in February and none in March. From late January onwards recently fledged juveniles were seen amongst adult terns but these have evidently moved to the Ashburton Rivermouth from breeding colonies elsewhere.



Figure 15: Recently fledged White-fronted Tern juveniles (dark markings on back and wings) at the Ashburton Rivermouth on 28 January 2026.

Black-fronted Terns were recorded on nine out of 12 months, being absent for most of the winter. The large post-breeding flock noted in last year's report (comprising 164 terns in March 2025) continued to grow with 182 counted on 24 April 2025. This is the second highest number recorded in this study, after a flock of 265 recorded in May 2020 (Table 14).

During the 2025 – 2026 breeding season, approximately 8-10 pairs of **Black-fronted Tern** attempted nesting on the riverbed above the delta. Most survived the frequent flooding and at least five pairs were noted with fledged chicks toward the end of the season. Post-breeding flocking was substantially down on 2024 -2025 with the highest count being 46 on 24 February 2026. However – as a footnote - a good-sized flock of 139 was recorded on 16 April 2026, shortly after the close of this current 12-month reporting period.

Of less common tern species, single **White-winged Black Terns** were present at the rivermouth in December and March (Table 13).

A lone **Common Tern**, a rare migrant from the Northern Hemisphere, was sighted roosting among other terns and gulls on 27 November 2026. This species has only been recorded a handful of times at the Ashburton Rivermouth, most recently in December 2023.



Figure 16: Common Tern (arrowed) roosting amongst White-fronted Terns, 27 November 2025.

Table 14. Highest count per year for tern species, 2017-18 to 2025-26.

Year	2017-2018	2018 - 2019	2019 - 2020	2020 - 2021	2021 - 2022	2022 - 2023	2023 - 2024	2024 - 2025	2025 - 2026
Caspian Tern	25	5	4	19	18	19	16	21	37
White-fronted Tern	4436	441	1048	24	561	332	504	864	516
Black-fronted Tern	117	66	42	265	82	68	115	164	182
Common Tern	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
White-winged Black Tern	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	1
Little Tern	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0

Other Species

New Zealand Kingfisher was recorded in November, January and March, which although only one bird seen each time, probably represents a resident breeding pair. They are easily missed at this large site if not seen by chance or heard calling.

Welcome Swallows (max. 28 in April) were observed all months over the lagoon, river and settlement.

Table 15. Monthly count data for New Zealand Kingfisher and Welcome Swallow, 2025 – 2026.

Month	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
New Zealand Kingfisher	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
Welcome Swallow	22	8	12	6	6	8	6	16	22	8	4	28

Pelagic seabirds occur in the sea off the Ashburton Rivermouth but are rarely observed during the monthly bird surveys. However, on 24 April 2025 a fishing boat passed the rivermouth quite close inshore, dragging a trawl net. Trailing it were a mixed group of seabirds scavenging for food. These comprised mostly gulls and spotted shags but among them were a number of pelagic seabirds including three **White-capped Mollymawks**, one **Giant Petrel** and at least one **Cape Petrel**. Occasionally pelagic seabirds are seen feeding off the beach.



Figure 17: A Trawler dragging nets off the beach on 24 April 2025 with two White-capped Mollymawks (inset) photographed via camera zoom trailing the boat. Lower inset shows the three pelagic species present – White-capped Mollymawk, Giant Petrel, Cape Petrel.



Other Wildlife

Two **New Zealand Sealions** frequented the lagoon through the summer-autumn months and occasional **New Zealand Fur Seals** were observed resting on the shingle spits.



Figure 19: New Zealand Sealions (two young bulls?) enjoying the sun and the sand, February & March 2026.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix 1. Ashburton Rivermouth bird survey data: April 2025 – March 2026

species	24.4.2025	16.5.2025	25.6.2025	30.7.2025	26.8.2025	24.9.2025	29.10.2025	27.11.2025	18.12.2025	28.1.2026	24.2.2026	16.3.2026
Black Cormorant	0	2	0	1	0	0	2	0	2	3	2	0
Pied Cormorant	19	17	11	13	2	7	9	20	25	5	11	6
Little Cormorant	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	4	2	3	6
Spotted Shag	3104	9984	6893	10,423	14	8	56	36	462	5,110	6,654	6,620
Otago Shag	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
White-faced Heron	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	1	1	1	2	2
Royal Spoonbill	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	2	5	1	0
Black Swan	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Canada Goose	0	16	0	0	0	0	0	9	36	7	0	64
Paradise Shelduck	8	0	0	2	4	5	4	4	2	2	14	18
Mallard/Grey Duck	159	90	16	24	31	11	7	18	6	26	22	43
Australasian Shoveler	0	0	0	12	0	0	11	0	0	3	0	0
Grey Teal	10	97	62	2	14	6	2	2	10	36	19	62
NZ Scaup	4	0	0	0	0	2	2	5	0	2	0	0
Swamp Harrier	2	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	3	3	1
SI Pied Oystercatcher	2	45	4	4	2	10	3	4	13	49	5	0
Variable Oystercatcher	2	2	2	2	3	2	0	0	0	2	1	0
Spur-winged Plover	58	11	2	12	2	4	2	8	6	17	18	44
Banded Dotterel	0	0	0	0	0	9	16	16	15	26	29	2
Black-fronted Dotterel	4	2	0	0	2	2	2	4	4	2	5	2
Wrybill	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0
Turnstone	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	24	6	2	0
Pied Stilt	24	84	0	4	2	16	2	4	10	13	3	16
Arctic Skua	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Sth Black-backed Gull	86	478	68	32	224	377	524	176	214	312	42	131
Red-billed Gull	310	227	51	0	11	29	1	21	36	145	66	54
Black-billed Gull	287	28	498	180	236	2510	340	241	158	596	22	795
Caspian Tern	5	2	0	1	5	1	3	0	4	9	37	29
White-fronted Tern	4	1	0	0	1	1	2	516	368	430	230	44
Common Tern	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Black-fronted Tern	182	0	0	4	0	8	10	13	19	33	46	40
White-winged Black Tern	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
NZ Kingfisher	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
Welcome Swallow	22	8	12	6	6	8	6	16	22	8	4	28
TOTAL	4295	11095	7620	10726	559	3018	1007	1119	1446	6854	7241	8010