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[Home](#) » [Uncategorized](#) » Endangered gulls need protection

## Endangered gulls need protection

Posted on December 27, 2015 by riveraid in Uncategorized

An aerial survey of endangered black-billed gulls has found a super-colony of some 10,000 birds nesting near Ashburton, under a bridge on State Highway One.

Rachel McClellan of Wildlands environmental consultancy said this colony was the largest found in a survey of South Island rivers last summer. The birds started building nests in November and stragglers left for the coast in late February, significantly later than usual.



Black-billed gull expert Rachel McClellan visits a colony

Dr McClellan surveyed 14 braided rivers in Canterbury by plane, photographing colonies at 10 sites along the Hurunui, Waimakariri, Opihi and Waitaki Rivers and at the mouths of the Rangitata and Rakaia.

Environment Canterbury supported the survey in its region with a \$20,000 grant from its Braided River Regional Initiative, helping meet Canterbury Water Management Strategy responsibilities for habitat protection.

"It was an amazing thing to see such a large colony on the outskirts of Ashburton," Dr McClellan said. "One side of me was thinking, 'This is wonderful' and the other side, 'Why did you nest alongside urban sprawl on a riverbank easily accessed by cats and dogs?'"

The plus side of the high-profile site was that it raised awareness of [black-billed gulls - tarāpunga](#), often confused with [red-billed gulls](#) and the much larger black-backed gulls but found only in New Zealand and less likely to scavenge at rubbish banks and around towns.

Black-billed gulls favour nesting sites close to farms with plenty of grass and moist soils.

"They congregate and feed in paddocks, and in Southland it's not unusual to see close to 1000 following a plough," Dr McClellan said.

She would like to see weeds cleared from islands at the Ashburton colony so the birds could nest out of reach of land-based predators, then decoys could be used to attract breeding gulls.

However, the birds could still be attacked from the air, by black-backed gulls and possibly harriers, and islands would remain accessible to people and 4WD vehicles.

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Also, there was no guarantee black-billed gulls would return to this site because colonies' location and size could change from year to year, Dr McClellan said.

Edith Smith, Ashburton Forest & Bird president, said black-billed gulls had bred in the area since 2007, up to 10 kilometres downstream and upstream of the SH1 bridge.

Ashburton members posted signs warning people to leave the endangered gulls alone, contracted a security firm to patrol the area and trapped hedgehogs, rats and a stoat which would kill black-billed chicks and eat eggs, Mrs Smith said. Cats - often pets as well as predators - were not targeted as no live traps were available.

Environment Canterbury put up plastic tape to warn people off disturbing the colony and trapped along the lower Ashburton River around the SH1 bridge, as part of an ongoing programme including pest control, blocking access particularly during the nesting season and signage along the river.

Dr McClellan hopes to repeat the survey in the next two breeding seasons, if funding can be found. The endangered status of black-billed gulls meant it was essential to build reliable data against which changes could be measured, she said.

Data collected in Canterbury was extremely accurate but supplied photographs from Southland were not clear enough for individual birds to be counted. Only two colonies were found in Otago and Marlborough counts were yet to come in.

Environment Canterbury Biodiversity team Leader Jo Abbott said it was good to see Ashburton Forest & Bird pulling together with Environment Canterbury and the Department of Conservation to protect and advocate for black-billed gulls. "Braided river management throughout the South Island is benefiting from agencies, organisations, community groups and individuals supporting one another through Braided River Aid (BRaid)," Dr Abbott said.

BRaid Incorporated (Braided River Aid) is an umbrella organisation set up in 2006 to protect braided river ecosystems in general and birds in particular.

## Background

### Black-billed gulls:

- Are the world's most endangered seabird
- Are New Zealand's only endemic gull, found nowhere else in the world
- Have lost more than 75% of their population in 30 years
- Carry the most serious "Nationally critical" conservation status.

About 90,000 mature black-billed gulls survive in New Zealand, scientists estimated in 2008. Seventy per cent were in Southland and 5 per cent in the North Island.

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