

DIARY NOTES

Riverbed bird breeding in the upper Waiau river, October 2016 – February, 2017

The main purpose of these Notes, is to record observations of black-fronted terns (BFT) and black-billed gulls (BBG) breeding in the upper Waiau riverbed during October 2016 – early 2017. The observations comprised an ECan survey on October 25 (down to Twin bridges), a raft trip of the upper-most Waiau (from below Malings Pass to the Hope junction) from Dec 8-10, plus day visits during December/January.

Personnel. ECan survey team (led by Jean Jack), Geoff Swailes/Nick Ledgard/Grant Davey and Sonny Whitelaw (BRaid), and Andrew and Brendan Cameron (Amuri Jet).

Shark's Tooth black-fronted tern colony (42 40 16S; 172 40 47E).

This colony has been present most years, but has not often been monitored during the season.

October 25. The first bird count during the ECan survey. It was estimated that at least 100 birds were present, most on the true right shingle areas, with 10-15 pairs on the island tail below the Shark's Tooth. The birds appeared to be on egg-nests.

Nov 4. Ten predator traps (5 DOC200 and 5 Timms) were installed along the true right shingle and shore areas by Geoff Swailes.

Nov 30. Traps checked by Nick L and Sonny W. Nothing was caught and there was no sign of predation anywhere in the colony, despite there being many rabbits plus predator sign (tracks) along the true right shoreline. A bird count was made while one person counted birds in the air while the other moved through the colony. It was estimated that there were still 100 birds in the area, despite a good-sized flood of 460 cumecs on Nov 28, which obviously displaced a number of nests. Birds were still on nests, some with young chicks.

Early – mid December. Traps checked by Andrew and Brendan C of Amuri Jet. Nothing caught – and no bird counts made.

Dec 15. Traps checked and rebaited by Jean J (ECan). Nothing caught – and no bird count made.

Dec 21. Traps checked and rebaited by Nick L and Grant D. One DOC200 missing – presumed lost in flood. Nothing caught. A bird count estimated that there were still 100 birds present. They appeared to be in two stages of breeding. Approximately 40% were in the mid-section of the true-right bank, where well grown chicks were being fed close to the river margin. Some were fledged and flying. The remainder (60%) were at the eastern end of the shingle area further from the water's edge. These appeared to be still on eggs or feeding young chicks. They were probably pairs which had lost nests during the Nov 28 flood, and had re-nested further to the east, as almost no birds were present in this area during the Nov 30 visit (plus one nest was seen with a single fresh egg). It was disturbing to note sheep grazing out on the shingle in amongst the nests - and being attacked by parent birds (Andrew and Brendan C had noted the same disturbance a week beforehand).



Sharks Tooth. BFTs nesting on mid-photo shingle.

Jan 10. Visit by Grant and Val Davey. Traps checked with one stoat caught. Only a handful of terns were present, so it appears that the birds observed at the eastern end on Dec 21 with eggs and young chicks did not succeed and their season has come to an end.

Feb 1. Geoff Swailes visited to recover traps. He could only find 3, so it appears that the major flood of January 19 (1155cm³ – largest for some years) swept away the rest.

Final outcome. No final count of tern fledglings was possible. It appears that at least 100 birds were in this colony, which would equate to 50 pairs. On Dec 21 it was estimated that 40% had off-spring either flying or close to it. If each pair had a single chick, then there would have been 20 flying fledglings present. The remaining 60% of birds were not present on Jan 10, so probably failed to fledge any chicks. This would make the colony's productivity 0.4.

NB. There are large areas of open shingle on the true right of this site, but they are slowly being invaded by gorse. At the moment, many bushes are widely scattered on the higher ground (only reached by the largest floods), but they are seeding and rapidly infilling. The large Jan 19 flood may have cleared this area, but if not the bushes should be removed in order to keep this important BFT breeding site clear of weeds.

Marble Point tern colony (42 37 19S; 172 46 24E)

This colony of a few dozen birds is on two islands just above the Point. On October 25, most birds were on a mid-river island, surrounded by water. The others were on a smaller raised shingle area just up-river and attached to the true left bank. Neither were closely inspected. Amuri Jet reports that floods have affected both sites, but that birds were seen on all their passing trips and that they were still present on Dec 20. It is not known how many pairs managed to fledge chicks – before the major flood of Jan 19, which would have fully covered this site.

Waiau-Hanmer plains colony (S 42 33.9470; E 172 41.7776)

This colony of black-billed gulls was first seen during the ECan riverbed survey of Oct 25. It was estimated to have a population of approximately 400 birds. No subsequent record has been received about this colony.

Waiau / Hope junction colony (42 35 16S; 172 34 40E)

Early Nov. This colony of gulls on an island just downriver from the Hope/Waiau junction, was first noted on the ECan BBG colony-detection flight in early Nov. It was estimated that 100 birds were present.

Dec 10. Nick L. noted the BBGs to be still present during his raft trip down the upper Waiau. Also on the same island were many breeding BFTs (estimate of 80-100 birds). Most birds were on open shingle along the north side of the island, as the higher portions were well covered with lupins – although some BFTs were seen landing in amongst the lupins.

Dec 21. Nick L and Grant D. observed the colony from SH7. From a distant photo, it was estimated that there were about 300 gulls present. No count could be made of the BFTs. It was hoped that canoes would allow passage



BBG/BFT colony island just below Waiau/Hope junction

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the island for a closer inspection, but no access could be found to the river bank.

Jan 10. This was checked from the SH by Grant and Val Davey, but no birds were seen to be present. Hence, it is not known what breeding success was had by the terns and gulls present.

NB. This island site looks a good one for terns and gulls, but most is covered by lupins, forcing the birds to nest on cleaner, but lower and more flood-prone shingle. The major flood of January 19 cleared about half the lupin-affected area, but left the rest intact. It could well be worth attempting to clear weeds from the higher ground before next season

Upper Waiau (above Hope Junction)

Dec 19-21. Nick L. rafted this section over 3 days with Inland Adventures. More riverbed birds were observed than anticipated, but no formal count was made. The species seen most frequently were BFTs and SIPO. Also present were BDs (scattered throughout braided sections), BBGs (mostly in Ada homestead area), PSs (just two pairs) and SBBGs (very few). No BBG colony was detected, but all other species were breeding. A breeding colony of BFTs was noted (42 29 52S; 172 34 12E), about 12km above the junction. It was estimated that there were at least 80 birds present. An SBBG was seen being attacked by BFTs.

Mid Waiau (bridge by Waiau township – GPS 1602631; 5277952)

A scattered colony of around 25 terns were seen with egg-nests on ECan's survey (Oct 26). Not far away (GPS 1611715; 5274653) was a small colony of BBGs with egg-nests. Nothing is known about the success of either colony – and the site offered easy access for vehicles and people from the south end of the bridge.

Lower Waiau.

The ECan survey of Oct 26 -29 located 3 more BFT colonies further down the river. The upper-most had 92 birds (GPS 1611915: 5274653), and nearer the coast one had 50 birds (location not recorded) and the eastern-most had 41 birds (GPS 1626835: 5266743). Nothing is known about the breeding success of these colonies.

Future management

It appears that reasonable numbers of BBGs and BFTs breed on the Waiau river. They should be monitored more closely to determine productivity (breeding success).

Suggestions have also been made to the Hurunui Zone Committee for habitat improvement (weed clearing and island creation) at the Sharks Tooth and Hope junction sites.