

# The Manawatu River Estuary



Peter Frost

[birds.wanganui@xtra.co.nz](mailto:birds.wanganui@xtra.co.nz)

ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY  
OF NEW ZEALAND

The Manawatu Estuary is the largest and most important estuary in the southern part of the North Island, providing a refuge for thousands of migratory wading birds, both from the northern hemisphere, during the southern summer, and the South Island, during the southern winter. It is one of six wetlands in New Zealand designated under the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (more commonly known as the Ramsar Convention).



The estuary is an important wintering ground for waders such as these Bar-tailed Godwits, migrants from the northern hemisphere that nest in eastern Russia and Alaska. It is also important for South Island waterbirds such as the Royal Spoonbill (up to 50% of the national population) and the Wrybill, an endemic New Zealand wader that is vulnerable because of predation while breeding, coupled with ongoing degradation of its breeding habitat on the braided rivers of the South Island.



The estuary is popular with birdwatchers and nature lovers generally, as well as with those engaged in fishing, boating, and off-road 4WD motoring. A major challenge in managing the area is to reconcile and make provision for these activities while retaining the area's core natural values (Photo: Peter Frost)



The salt-marsh ribbonwood plant community in the upper reaches of the estuary supports the largest southern population of the North Island race of the Fernbird (Matata), *Bowdleria punctata vealeae* (Photo: Paul Gibson)

## Birds of the Manawatu River Estuary

A total of 93 bird species have been recorded on or around the Manawatu River Estuary. The following are some of the more prominent bird species that occur, and which you might see when you visit the estuary. A full list can be found at <http://www.nzbirds.com/birding/manawatubirds.html>.

Black Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	Black Backed Gull	<i>Larus dominicanus</i>
Pied Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax varius</i>	Red-billed Gull	<i>Larus scopulinus</i>
Little Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax melanoleucus</i>	Black-billed Gull	<i>Larus bulleri</i>
Little Black Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax sulcirostris</i>	Caspian Tern	<i>Sterna caspia</i>
Black Swan	<i>Cygnus atratus</i>	White-fronted Tern	<i>Sterna striata</i>
Paradise Duck	<i>Tadorna variegata</i>	Pied Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>
Mallard Duck	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Sacred Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon sancta</i>
Grey Duck	<i>Anas superciliosa</i>	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Grey Teal	<i>Anas gracilis</i>	Welcome Swallow	<i>Hirundo tahitica</i>
White-faced Heron	<i>Ardea novaehollandiae</i>	New Zealand Pipit	<i>Anthus novaeseelandiae</i>
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>
Royal Spoonbill	<i>Platalea regia</i>	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Australasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus poiciloptilus</i>	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelus</i>
Australasian Harrier	<i>Circus approximans</i>	Fernbird	<i>Bowdleria punctata</i>
Pied Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	Fantail	<i>Rhipidura fuliginosa</i>
Variable Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus unicolor</i>	Silvereye	<i>Zosterops lateralis</i>
Spur-winged Plover	<i>Vanellus miles</i>	Tui	<i>Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae</i>
Pukeko	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>
Banded Dotterel	<i>Charadrius bicinctus</i>	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelabs</i>
Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis fulva</i>	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>
Wrybill	<i>Anarchynchus frontalis</i>	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	Magpie	<i>Gymnorhina tibicen</i>

### Migrant Waders

The Manawatu Estuary supports two groups of migrant waders. One comprises those species that breed in the South Island during the southern spring and summer, and then winter on estuaries of the North Island, principally the Firth of Thames, adjacent to the Coromandel Peninsular, and the Manukau and Kaipara estuaries. These species include Wrybill, Pied Oystercatcher, Pied Stilt, and those Banded Dotterel breeding on the Canterbury plains and in the Marlborough region. Some of these birds also winter on the Manawatu Estuary but its main importance is as a stop-over site for birds on migration, particularly the Wrybill. The Manawatu estuary supports more than 1% of the world population of this species on its migration to and from its wintering grounds; up to 70 birds winter on the estuary.

The second group of migratory waders are those that breed during the northern summer in eastern Russia and western Alaska, and then fly many thousands of kilometres south to winter in Australasia, including New Zealand. The most numerous of these are the Bar-tailed Godwit (85,000-110,000 spending the northern winter in New Zealand, ~70% in the North Island), the Lesser Knot (45,000-70,000 birds) and Turnstone (4,000-7,000 birds), all of which occur on the Manawatu estuary.





White-faced Heron (Matuku-moana)  
*Ardea novaehollandiae*



Royal Spoonbill (Kotuku-ngutupapa)  
*Platalea regia*



Red-billed Gull (Tarapunga or Akiaki)  
*Larus novaehollandiae*



Black-billed Gull (Tarapunga)  
*Larus bulleri*



Black-backed Gull (Karoro)  
*Larus dominicanus*



Caspian Tern (Taranui)  
*Sterna caspia*

**Photo credits:** Peter Frost (White-faced Heron, Royal Spoonbill, Red-billed Gull, Caspian Tern); Paul Gibson (Black-billed Gull and Black-backed Gull).





Bar-tailed Godwit (Kuaka)  
*Limosa lapponica*



Red or Lesser Knot (Huahou)  
*Calidris canutus*



Banded Dotterel  
*Charadrius bicinctus*



Wrybill (Ngutuparore)  
*Anarhynchus frontalis*



Turnstone  
*Arenaria interpres*



Pied Stilt (Poaka)  
*Himantopus himantopus*



Pied Oystercatcher (Torea)  
*Haematopus ostralegus*



Variable Oystercatcher (Toreapango)  
*Haematopus unicolor*

**Photo credits:** Peter Frost (Wrybill); Paul Gibson (Bar-tailed Godwit, Red Knot, Turnstone; Pied Stilt, Pied Oystercatcher, Variable Oystercatcher); Ormond Torr (Banded Dotterel).