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SHORT NOTE

Wrybills (*Anarhynchus frontalis*) at the Manawatu River Estuary, North Island, New Zealand

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The 'sandspit' on the True Right bank of the Manawatu River, in Foxton Beach Village, (175°14'E 40°30'S) is a significant roosting site for migratory and resident waders, gulls, terns, pied stilts *(Himantopus himantopus),* royal spoonbills *(Platalea regia),* shags, ducks, and other birds. The 'sandspit' is 2-5 ha, depending on the state of the tide, *c.*1 km from the Tasman Sea, It is surrounded on 3 sides by the main course of the river and by tidal flats, and as well as this natural isolation, it is protected as a "bird sanctuary" by local bye-laws.

On 14 Jan 2006, I observed a flock of 29 wrybills *(Anarhynchus frontalis)* arrive on the 'sandspit', rest briefly, then take flight again and leave the area. The weather was sunny and warm, with a light south-easterly wind, and visibility was good. The tide was rising, being about mid-tide when the birds arrived. The wrybill flock arrived at *c.*0930 in a compact group and landed on dry sand above high water mark *c.*20 m in front of my position on the western edge of the 'sandspit'. The birds settled quickly after landing and, with a few exceptions, they scarcely moved but remained close together,with *c.*½ of the birds resting on 1 leg. However, the birds in the flock were sufficiently separated to be counted easily using 9 × 25 binoculars. No birds attempted to feed and the flock was silent when resting. The flock rested slightly apart from the numerous lesser knots (*Calidris canutus),* variable oystercatchers (*Haematopus unicolor*), bar-tailed godwits (*Limosa lapponica*), pied stilts (*Himantopus himantopus*), and several Pacific golden plovers (*Pluvialis fulva*) that were also roosting on the sandspit. After about 10 min, the wrybills departed, with a few calling as they took flight. The flock quickly gained height to 10-25 m and headed south-west along the river towards the sea, returning the way they had come.

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In Jan, wrybills should be moving north from the breeding grounds on the eastern braided rivers of the South I to wintering areas on the northern harbours. The brevity of the flock's visit to the 'sandspit' area in the Manawatu River estuary suggests that the birds were on migration, although the value of a 10 min rest during a flight of several hundred km would seem to be slight. It is, of course, unknown how long the flock had been flying before it visited the Manawatu River estuary, nor how far a wrybill can fly without resting, but my observation suggests that the migration may not be made non-stop.

During a visit to the Manawatu River estuary on 13 Feb 2006, I observed a flock of 25 wrybills resting in the 'sandspit' area, where they stayed for at least the 1 h that I was present. None took flight during this time but most periodically walked 10-25 m, sometimes apparently in response to the movement of a nearby flock of bar-tailed godwits. The wrybills tended to avoid the godwits. One wrybill had a metal band on the left tarsus, but although it allowed an approach to *c.*7-8 m I was unable to read the band number, even using a 30 × 80 telescope, and despite the good visibility in sunny weather.

Fledglings and failed breeders start leaving the South I breeding rivers in late Nov (Heather & Robertson 1996), but the main northward movement is in late Dec and early Jan. Davies (1997) reported sightings of birds 1st banded as adults at Taramaire, near Miranda on the Firth of Thames, and subsequently fitted with colour-bands while breeding in the South I. Individuals last seen on the Tekapo River, inland Canterbury, on 27 Oct and 30 Nov 1993 were observed at Taramaire on 1 Jan 1994 and 27 Dec 1993, respectively. Individuals that were still at the Ohau River on 13 and 18 Oct 1992 were seen at Taramaire on 31 Dec 1992 and 11 Jan 1993, respectively. Between 1987 and 1996, 2,383 wrybills were banded on their wintering grounds

at 2 locations near Auckland (Davies 1997)., so it is possible that the banded wrybill I saw on 13 Feb 2006 was 1 of the birds banded near Auckland, which would make it at least 9 years old and indicate that birds seen at Manawatu Estuary do continue on to northern harbours.

Wrybills have been reported at various locations on the Horowhenua, Manawatu, and Wanganui coastline (Bull *et al.* 1985). Data collected during 1999-2004 for the Ornithological Society of New Zealand's Bird Atlas Project reveal that wrybill were recorded at the Manawatu River estuary in 9 months of the year, but not in Jul, Aug, or Nov (C.J.R.Robertson pers comm. 2006*)*. This may suggest either that wrybill are travelling for several months of the year and use the Manawatu River estuary as a stopping point, or that there is a small resident or semi-resident population there for much of the year. A review of records for a 9-year period from 1994 to 2003 published in Classified Summarised Notes (Parrish 2001, 2003, 2006; Parrish & Lock 1996, 1997; Tennyson & Lock 1998, 2000) revealed that wrybills are present in the Manawatu River estuary throughout the year, including during the winter months (records for 1 Jul to 30 Jun years) as follows, 1994-1995: max. 29 on 4 Mar; 1995-1996: max. 38 on 20 Mar; 1996 to 1997: max. 36 on 20 Jun; 1997-1998: max. 40+, Feb-Apr; 1998 to 1999: present every month, max. 51 on 23 Aug; 1999-2000: 15-40 from Jul to Nov, increasing Nov to Dec, building to max. of 45-48 in May; 2000-2001: 36 in Jul, min. 1 in Nov/Dec, increasing to max of 42 on 6 Feb, then *c*.35-39 until end of Jun; 2001- 2002: max. 39 on 9 Oct; 71 on 5 Jan; 2002-2003: *c*.25 in winter, max. 51 on 7 Oct, 50 on 5 Apr.

These observations highlight our lack of knowledge of wrybill migration. They suggest that the Manawatu River estuary may be a staging point, at least on the northward migration during summer. However, it is not clear whether wrybill migrate through the Manawatu River estuary during most months of the year, or whether a small population may be resident or semi-resident there, including during the winter months. In particular, we do not know whether the wrybills seen in the Manawatu River estuary in winter remain continuously or whether is there some movement to other beaches and estuaries either nearby or farther away. Together, these sporadic observations highlight how little we know about the timing and routes taken by migrating wrybills.

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