

## Ashley – Okuku Confluence Area – November 2018

The Okuku is a large true left tributary of the Ashley, joining the Ashley about 22km upstream from the coast – as measured along the river. This area was visited as part of a small project the aims of which are to assess the bird populations during breeding time of smaller rivers which aren't usually surveyed. It had been found in the Kowai river, near its junction with the Waimakariri, that there was an unusual density of nesting banded dotterels. It was thought that the same could be true with the Okuku.

The ARRG annual bird survey begins at this confluence, one of the aims of this visit was to determine whether this is an appropriate place to start.

The Okuku was traversed from the confluence with the Ashley to a point 3.4km upstream. Access to the river was from Birch Hill Road. The Ashley was traversed for about 1.6km upstream from the junction and for about 500m downstream.

In this area the Okuku often has a berm to berm width of 100 – 150m. There are some large islands with significant weed and tree growth, but there are also large clean gravel bars which look suitable for braided river birds to nest. There were generally 2 – 3 actively flowing channels.

Above the Okuku junction the Ashley narrows very significantly – in the area traversed the berm to berm width is actually less than that of the Okuku and gravel bars are smaller. Further upstream it does widen again, but access to here is quite difficult due to water depth and thick vegetation along the banks. Flow is very channelized – into 1 – 2 braids.

Three active gravel extraction operations occur in this area. The largest being that of Taggarts on the south side of the Ashley immediately adjacent to the confluence. They have taken gravel from a large old channel and from in the middle of the river, have stockpiled it and are currently treating it and trucking it away. There is a small operation about 400m south of the Okuku bridge and another site 900m south of the bridge which has recently been excavated. About 1.3km north of the Okuku bridge there is a gravel screening and trucking operation.



The bird count was done in a non-standard “there and back manner” considering only one person was doing it. On the way back only birds of a species not seen on the way there were counted.

#### Okuku Birds

Very few birds were seen with only one black-fronted tern and a pair of pied oystercatchers representing the core group of braided river birds. Other birds were 1 little shag, 2 plovers, 1 duck and 1 paradise duck. No banded dotterels were seen.

#### Ashley Birds

Upstream of the confluence the bird population was very similar to that in the Okuku. One pied stilt, one pied oystercatcher and 2 black-fronted terns were seen – all in flight. Four paradise ducks, 1 mallard and 2 spur-winged plovers were counted.

Immediately below the confluence the situation was quite different:

Banded dotterels – four adults and one chick were seen. It seems likely that there are nests in the area.

Pied stilts – five adults were seen, they were showing “broken wing” behaviour and were dive-bombing hares. They appear to have nests on a large island that extends for about 750m southward from the Okuku junction. One nest was found, this had 2 broken eggs in it – with most of the shells still there. This island has actively flowing and quite deep channels each side of it, so perhaps there is reason to suspect airborne predators. However the hares were on the island. – four ducks were also seen.

No river birds were observed for approximately 1.4km westward along the riverbed from just above the north branch confluence.

#### Conclusions

- Banded dotterel and probably pied stilt appear to nest in small numbers along the section of the Kowai from Leithfield to the sea. This is a very minor breeding area for these birds.
- Black-fronted dotterel appear to be more common in this small river than they are in the much larger Ashley 10km to the south – where they are a rare sight.
- Four-wheel drive traffic would be a major impediment to braided river birds in this very small river.

G. Davey, 26/11/18



## Legend

● Gravel Operation

### Bird Nests

● Pied Stilt

### Bird Observations

▲ Black-fronted Tern

▲ Banded Dotterel

▲ Pied Stilt

▲ Pied Oystercatcher

▲ Other

**Ashley - Okuku  
Confluence  
Bird Observations  
21/11/18**

0 250 500 750 1000 m

