



Ashley Rakahuri Rivercare Group 2025 Annual Survey Results

Introduction

The 26th annual survey was conducted on November 22 and 23 this year. It had been scheduled for 15 November but had to be postponed due to increased flow in the river.

The weather was cool and cloudy with low flow of 3.9 cumecs at the gorge. Flow had reached 29 cumecs on 13 November.

We didn't have enough participants to simultaneously survey the five usual reaches, so had to split it over two days. Even so, there weren't enough surveyors for the third reach from near the railway bridge to halfway to State Highway One – but this was mitigated by zigzagging across the river. Reaches 0 – 6km and 6 – 10km with 5 and 6 participants respectively were surveyed on 22 November with 10 – 15km, 15 – 19 and 19 – 21km done on 23 November with 3, 3 and 2 surveyors respectively.

Survey quality was probably comparable to that of other years. As usual we had too few experienced surveyors and people with insufficient familiarity with bird species. Confusion between wrybills and banded dotterel was as usual apparent. Sixty-four wrybills were counted, this is a credible number for the adults and fledglings along the river, but it isn't credible for the surveyors to have actually observed them all in one walk through. This is evident from detailed monitoring prior to the survey, especially in two areas – near the airfield and halfway to the coast from Rangiora. Seven wrybills were therefore taken off the count for these two areas, still leaving a record of 58. In previous years similar adjustments have been made. Shag species are another source of confusion.

Results

Figure 1 and Figure 2 show results for the main braided river species, other than the black-billed gull, between the Okuku junction and State Highway One since 2000. Total numbers were higher than in 2024 and reflect the relatively weed-free nature of the river this year. Bare gravel is by far the main control on bird numbers. Nesting success is the metric we need to be most concerned about, not numbers of birds. We have attributed the large peak in 2019 to birds displaced by flooding from the Waimakariri.

Braided river bird numbers per kilometre (other than black-billed gull) are depicted in Figure 3 and for comparison those for 2024 in Figure 4. Black-billed gull numbers are shown in Figure 5. Pie charts for other river birds are shown in Figure 6.

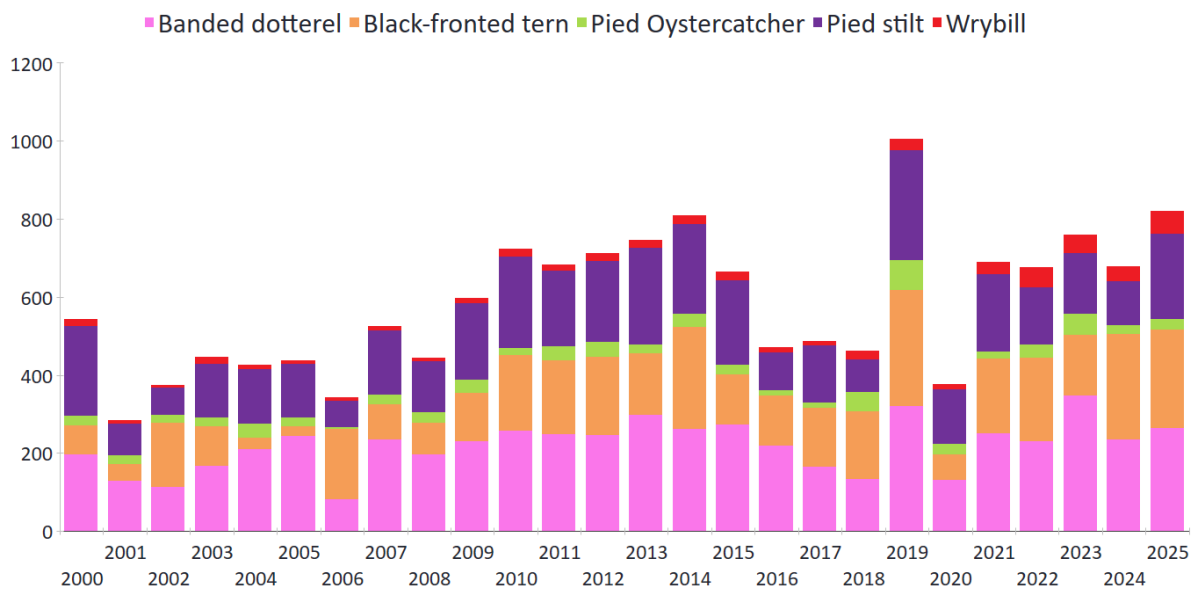


Figure 1. Annual survey results 2000 - 2025. Braided river birds.

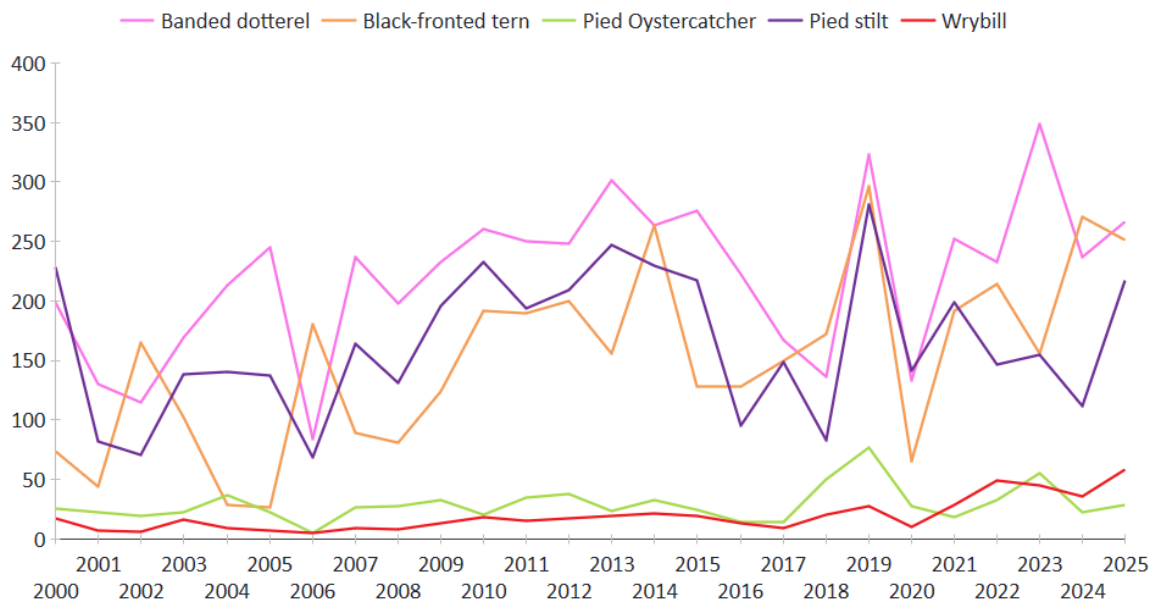


Figure 2. Annual survey results 2000 - 2025, braided river birds, line.

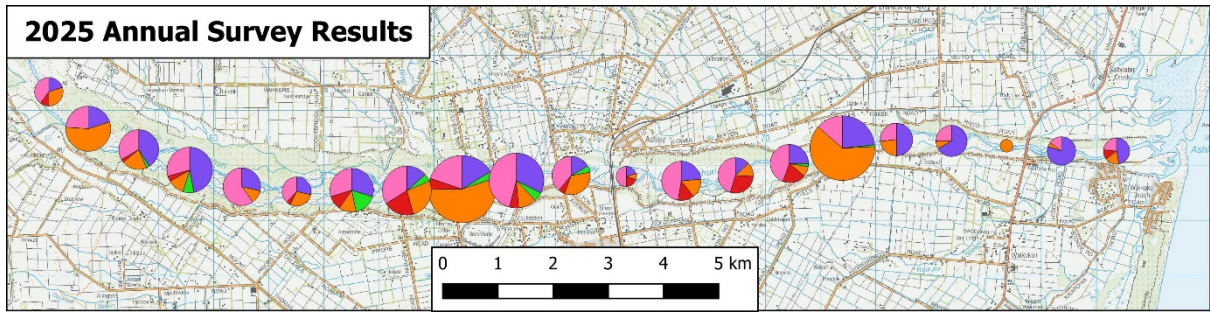


Figure 3. Braided river birds by kilometre, 2025

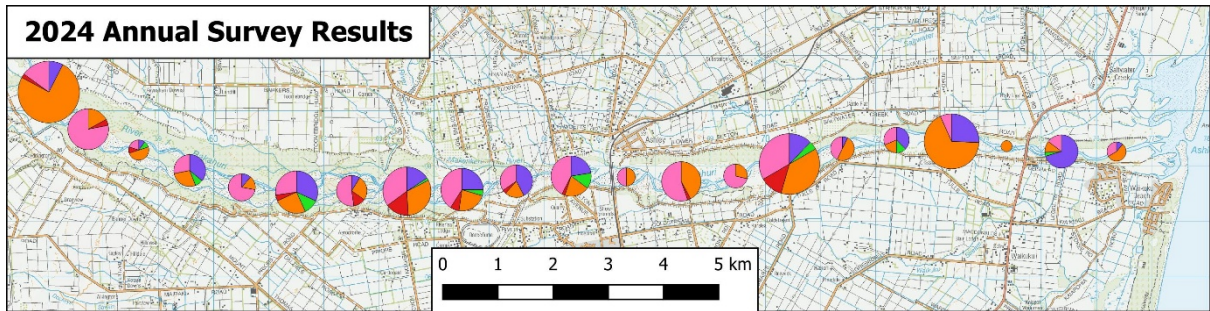


Figure 4. Braided river birds by kilometre, 2024

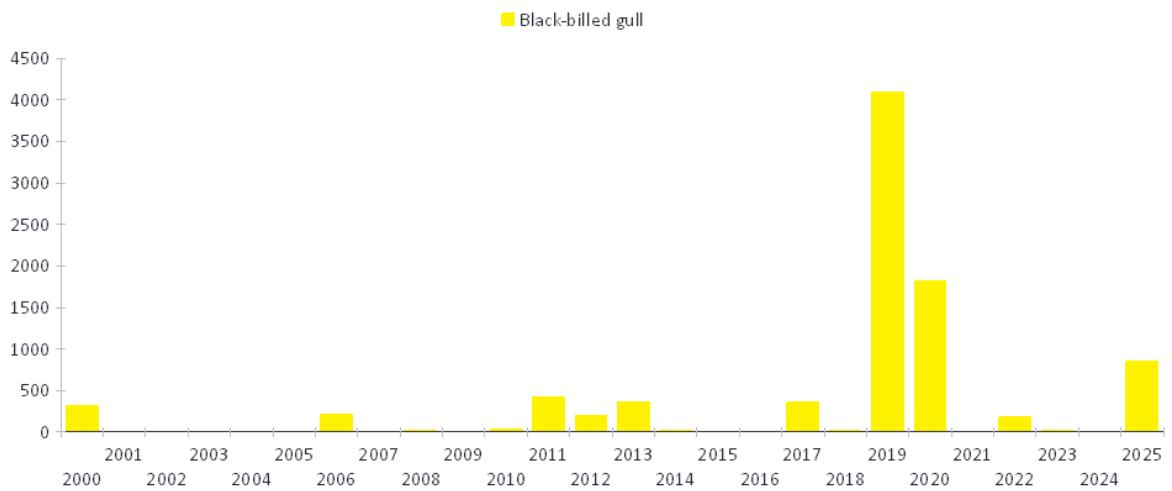


Figure 5. Black-billed gulls since 2000

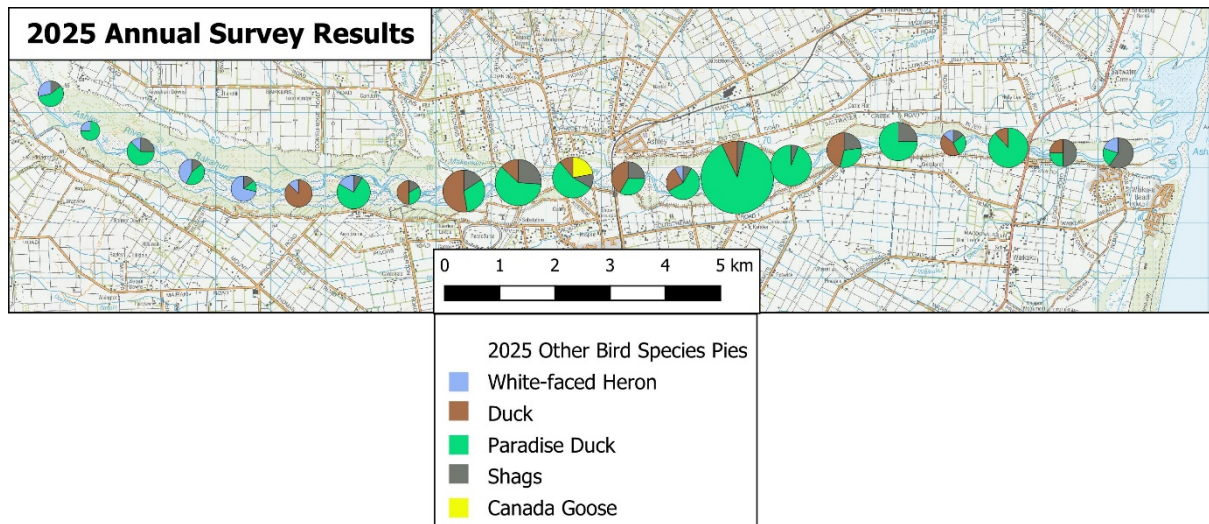


Figure 6. Other bird species

1. Wrybill

As mentioned above wrybill numbers were at a record of 58 (adjusted). In 2024 there were 36 and the previous record of 49 was in 2022. From monitoring during the nesting season, the record is credible, even if the exact number is suspect. Most nests had been found prior to the count in the Marchmont – Smarts and Groyne 2/airfield areas, this is apparent in Figure 3.

Unusually two female wrybills were seen almost at the Okuku junction and even more unusually a female with a fledgling was observed where the river enters the estuary. From detailed observations of wrybill territories elsewhere along the river, there is little doubt the fledgling was from a nearby nest. This is the first time we have noted wrybill nesting so far east, but a chick was seen just below the SH1 bridge in 2024. Wrybill numbers are increasing over time, and their range is also expanding. The increase in numbers this year is at least partially due to a more successful nesting season than usual with more fledglings in the area.

2. Black-fronted Tern

Two hundred and fifty-one BFT were counted this year, slightly less than the 271 in 2024 – but given the accuracy of the counts, the reduction isn't significant.

Earlier in the season there seemed to be many more BFT in the area with roosting of large numbers in the Okuku junction, Groyne 2/Airfield and Smarts areas. Up to 85, 144 and 150 were counted from photographs in these areas respectively between 6 and 12 September.

Greatest numbers of BFT were counted at the colonies at Groyne 9, Groyne 1 and Tulls. The G9 colony wasn't known before the survey.

3. Banded dotterel

BD numbers at 267 were higher than in 2024, but well short of the record of 349 in 2023. As is usual, this was the most numerous species on the river. Greatest numbers were between kilometres 8 and 10 – in the G2 to G1 area.

4. Pied stilt

Stilts generally vie with BFT for the second-most abundant species on the river. This year they lost, but the total of 217 was considerably higher than the 112 in 2024.

5. Southern pied oystercatcher

SIPO are never abundant on the river. This year 28 were counted compared to 22 and 55 in the previous two years.

6. Black-billed gull

BBG numbers are highly erratic and cannot be graphed with other braided river bird species as numbers tend to overwhelm. For several months up to 700 or more had been roosting in the Smarts area, they came and went several times and finally started nesting in the Tulls area soon before the annual count. About 800 were counted on the ground and from drone images on or close to the count date. There were also 55 about 4km downstream from the Okuku junction.

7. Southern black-backed gull

Only 6 were counted in the whole survey area. This was lower than the 18 the previous year and also lower than the long-term average of 11. Most SBBG we see are en route between Tulls Road dairy farm paddocks and the estuary. But commonly pairs can be seen on the margins of the nesting areas of other species.

8. Other species

- As usual paradise ducks were the most abundant of the water birds along the river.
- Black shag numbers were at a record level – 22. There is often confusion with shag species, but higher numbers of these had been apparent during the season.
- Three black-fronted dotterels were seen in the lower part of the river, this is about average for this species. However, they are very small easy to miss birds.

Grant Davey

13/1/26