



Waikanae estuary

photograph Mik Peryer

Bird Watching

If you observe the birds, you usually can tell what species you are likely to encounter depending on where you are looking. For argument's sake you would think to look for black swans on a lake or a large body of water. That is probably a good place to start. However swans also like to graze the open paddocks, sometimes in groups of around five hundred birds. As you can imagine this upsets the local farmers no end, as the birds pollute their paddocks with their droppings.

When nesting they will quite often find a spot on the farmer's field, without a lot of water handy, and will raise their family from there. Swallows as well like open water and can be seen flitting around, ducking and diving over the water, feeding on the insects. They also like to roost on adjacent power lines. Paradise ducks also like water, but they spend a lot of time grazing, and can be found on open ground in quite large numbers, or on hillsides where, when paired off, they will sit and watch for danger, making that harsh cry of theirs. Some even nest in high trees; goodness knows how they get their babies down to the ground. It's the most unlikely place to look for the nest of a bird with webbed feet.



Pukeko

Pukeko like to graze the fields. They aren't called swamp hens for nothing and like the swampy ground. They can also be found where people live adjacent to a wetland, pinching plants out of their garden.



Black swans grazing the farmer's paddocks---South Wairarapa
Photograph David Peryer

Open and swamp land

The harrier hawks will range over a large area from open paddocks to swamp land and forests. They usually have a set pattern depending on the wind direction, and cover all of their territory at some stage or another.

Tidal-flats

The gulls also have a pattern to their day and it's governed very largely by the tides. Low tide exposes the sand spit and the mud flats, with all the goodies that live in these areas. That's when they do most of their feeding. The black-backed gulls will spread out all along the beach, at roughly the same distance from each other, and take their food on the last little wavelet that comes in. I am not sure what it is that they feed on but they all do it at times. When the tide changes and comes in, the gulls will rest in large numbers on the sand banks and mud flats. If you observe them even from quite a distance, you can distinguish between the species. The black-backed gulls all roost together, sometimes hundreds at a time; they look a dull white colour with the black back muting them from the distance, and usually don't move around much. The white-fronted terns on the other hand show up whiter and smaller and appear to be restless as there is always one or two of them lifting off and landing again. To one side you may see a group of red-billed gulls. These birds show up white like the terns but they don't move around as much. A little way off, usually on their own, may sit a couple of Caspian, the largest of the visiting terns. Amongst them all may be two or three large black shags keeping to themselves.

Patterns

All the birds have a pattern to their day and it depends on where the food is that drives them. They like to watch what the other species are doing as these birds may have discovered some food source that they had missed. The wind direction also plays a large part in what the birds get up to and where they fly. When the black-backed gulls resting on the mud flats in the Waikanae river are disturbed and the southerly wind is blowing, they will fly across to the northern bank where the ground rises quite high and fly against the southerly wind getting lift as the wind hits the bank and rises upward. They fly against the wind using the lift off the bank to propel them along without having to flap their wings. So when you have time to study a bird take note of what its doing, where it is living and what it is feeding on. Watch which way the wind is blowing, as the birds always sit facing into the wind. You may learn more than you realize.



Our new family

Love birds

Henrietta and Henry the black swans with Thomas the goose have a new family. They have hatched out six new babies. This is their thirteenth nest, making it eighty-two eggs in six years. Two eggs were duds, however of the rest, sixty eight survived old enough to fly away. I thought I might tell of their escapades over the thirty years that they have been on our lagoons, and run it as a serial, as a lot of people who get this newsletter may not be aware of the wonderful story of our love birds.



Waimanu lagoon with six young pied shags below their nesting tree

Hope you enjoy our twentieth Waikanae estuary newsletter

Mik the Birdman of Waikanae

