

Hawksbury Lagoon update December

Judging by the recent coverage in the ODT of sightings of kotuku, white heron, they are still looked upon as something special, just as they were several hundred years ago: he kotuku rerenga tahi (a white heron flies once). The bird was seen as an esteemed visitor; something rare and beautiful that you might only see once in a lifetime.

Hawksbury Lagoon then is especially favoured because the bird that has been around since the first week or so of November is not the first. True, it has been a while since the 1990s when a kotuku returned year after year, and the one that spent most of its time in the deep ditch around the racecourse a couple of years ago was a little shy and only rarely poked its head up above the banks, maybe not wanting the attention that is accorded an esteemed visitor.



While South Island Maori did not eat the bird, it was sought after for its long white back plumes and it was even kept in captivity for its feathers. Europeans had similar tastes and by 1940 there were only four nests left in its sole breeding area in New Zealand; in native forest alongside the lagoon at Okarito on the West Coast. Things have improved since then and there are now 40-50 nests though that still makes for a meagre total of, at most, 200 birds in the country.

For many years spoonbills, the other large white bird you are likely to see at Hawksbury Lagoon, only nested alongside the herons at Okarito. Then around the late 70s they started to nest near Blenheim and numbers have since built up from around 50 to well over 2,000 birds. They are now regularly present at Hawksbury and as many as 70-80 have been seen perched in the trees in autumn, stopping off on their way to Nelson and harbours further north for winter. It is thought that the reason for the increase was due to extra birds crossing the Tasman from Australia, those maybe, less set in their ways.

In 2013 a fair few kotuku crossed the Tasman and at one stage in autumn there were seven together at Tomahawk Lagoon in Dunedin. If this happens again then maybe kotuku, like spoonbills, will no longer fly our way but once, though surely, they will still be looked upon as an esteemed visitor.

Derek Onley

HL committee member

PS Just a reminder to please keep dogs on a leash. The HL is a wildlife refuge and as such it is a privilege for us to be permitted to have dogs there at all. Merry Christmas.

Shirley McKewen

Chair