

### New Zealand Dotterels breeding in northern Hawke's Bay

Records of the New Zealand Dotterel (*Charadrius obscurus*) as a breeding bird in the North Island show it to be confined to the northern half of the island. The only sight records south and east of the Bay of Plenty, and Hicks Bay, where it is a regular breeder, are of single birds seen at Muriwai Lagoon, Gisborne, in 1959 and 1962 (Edgar 1969). Earlier records would indicate the New Zealand Dotterel may have been a breeding species in Hawke's Bay: "Formerly present on Portland Island, and recorded by Hamilton (1886) as present in the area between the Tutaekuri and Mohaka Rivers" (Brathwaite 1955, Edgar 1969).

My first sighting of New Zealand Dotterel in northern Hawke's Bay was of a single bird on the sandy flats of the lower Oraka Estuary, Mahia Peninsula, on 5 November 1989. This bird was not seen again, but one turned up in the Napier area a week later (W. Twydle, pers. comm.).

On 7 October 1990, I saw two New Zealand Dotterels together on the same Oraka sand flat as the 1989 bird. Both birds had very pale reddish breast colouring, which darkened a little on both birds over the following two weeks. On 11 and 12 November 1990, a survey of coastal birds of northern Hawke's Bay was made by a team of 18 OSNZ and Department of Conservation members. In the early afternoon of 11 November 1990, Murray Jefferies, assisted by Wayne and Margaret Twydle, set up a hide to photograph a Variable Oystercatcher (*Haematopus unicolor*) on its nest at the Oraka Estuary. While he was in the hide a New Zealand Dotterel was

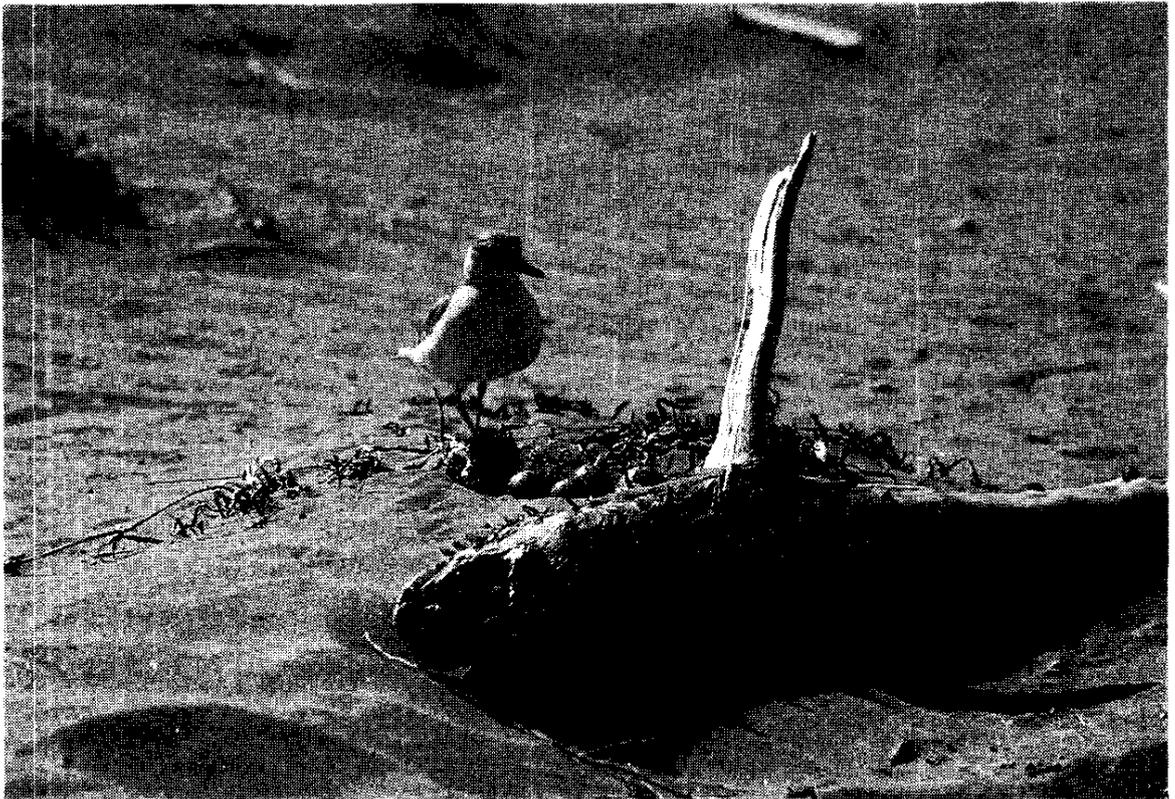


FIGURE 1. — New Zealand Dotterel at Oraka, Mahia Peninsula, 11 November 1990.

Photo: Murray Jefferies

seen to return to its nest nearby. The nest, at the base of a sand dune, was a hollow in sand and dried seaweed piled up against a small piece of driftwood. The nest contained 5 eggs, which the incubating bird had difficulty in covering, spending a lot of time shuffling around trying to bring the fifth egg under its body with its wing. The nest was on the estuary side of a sandspit, formed where the Oraka Estuary enters the sea. This sandspit was being used also by other breeding waders, including two pairs of Variable Oystercatcher, three pairs of Banded Dotterel (*Charadrius bicinctus*) and three pairs of Pied Stilt (*Himantopus leucocephalus*).

At each visit until 2 December 1990 the female was sitting, with the now slightly redder male always nearby. On 9 December 1990 the nest was empty, the adults being found with three young on the open beach side of the sandspit. On the next visit a week later there was no sign of the young, though the adult birds were present. The fate of the young is unknown. Regular visits were continued in case the birds re-nested but there was no obvious sign of this, though both birds have remained in the Oraka area and were still present on 3 March 1991.

Also on 11 November 1990, as part of the coastal survey, a team comprising Keith Hawkins, Christine McRae and Brent Stephenson crossed from Mahia Peninsula to Portland Island, which is about 1 km off the southern tip of Mahia Peninsula. The low-lying northern tip of Portland Island is grassland, grazed by sheep. It has a narrow sand beach and some dunes between the grassed area and the wide papa platform reef. Birds nesting were Black-backed Gull (*Larus dominicanus*), Red-billed Gull (*L. scopulinus*), Black-billed Gull (*L. bulleri*), Caspian Tern (*Sterna caspia*), White-fronted Tern (*S. striata*) and Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*). While surveying this area, the team saw a pair of New Zealand Dotterels with a single chick, estimated to be about one week old. The fate of this chick remains unknown as further visits to Portland Island have not been possible.

In addition to the breeding of these two pairs, New Zealand Dotterels were also present further south in Hawke's Bay during early summer. One bird was seen at East Clive on 3, 4 and 9 November 1990, and two were seen on 20 November 1990 at Ahuriri (W. Twydale, pers. comm.). Two New Zealand Dotterels were also reported from Whangara, 25 km north of Gisborne, during November 1990 (C. Ward, pers. comm.). Although it is too soon to confirm a permanent extension to the North Island breeding range of the New Zealand Dotterel, an influx of up to 8 of this threatened species, including 2 confirmed breeding pairs during the 1990-91 season, into the East Coast-Hawke's Bay is welcome news. It will now be important to monitor all likely breeding areas throughout the East Coast, Hawke's Bay and Wairarapa in the seasons ahead.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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#### LITERATURE CITED

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