

SHORT NOTE

First recent recorded breeding of the New Zealand dabchick (*Poliiocephalus rufopectus*) in the South Island

CHRIS PETYT

56 Tukurua Rd, Takaka R.D. 2, Nelson, New Zealand

The New Zealand dabchick (*Poliiocephalus rufopectus*, hereafter dabchick) was originally found on both main islands of New Zealand but since the middle of the 20th century there has been no confirmed breeding records for the South I. On 19 Mar 2012 I received information from Murray Gavin that he had seen a small unidentified grebe with 2 young on Lake Killarney in suburban Takaka, Golden Bay (40.51.1 S 172.48.3 E). I visited the lake the next day and over the next 2 weeks many observers watched, photographed and filmed a pair of dabchicks with 2 young on the lake. Their identification was confirmed and a report submitted by Richard Stocker to OSNZ Records Appraisal Committee (RAC) was accepted. On 26 Mar, Don Cooper watched the grebes for over 2 hours and never saw the chicks dive, but they were fed regularly by both adults. Food delivered to the chicks included a small fish and an invertebrate larva. L. Grueber subsequently observed the chicks diving for up to 5 seconds on 30 Mar (D. Cooper *pers. comm.*).

Enquiries were made from people living or working near the lake and it appears the birds arrived in Sep or Oct 2011. One person thought the pair arrived together, but another observer suggested one bird arrived alone and the other joined it later. The birds were even identified by a

visiting American birder (Tracy Farrington, *pers. comm.*) on 16 Mar 2011, but the significance of the sighting was not realised. Don Cooper compared photographs taken on 26 Mar to published photographs (Moon 1979) and considered the young to be about 3 weeks old on that date. This means they hatched c. 5 Mar with eggs laid c. 10 Feb 2012 (incubation period 22-23 days; Heather & Robertson 1996). According to Heather & Robertson (1996), dabchicks have an extended breeding season from Jun to Mar, but mostly from Sep to Dec (presumably based on central North I data). The late date for chicks in the Lake Killarney pair may be the result of earlier nesting attempts having been depredated. Furthermore, any nest with eggs on 14 Dec 2011 would have been flooded as the water level rose substantially during heavy rain.

The last "certain" recorded breeding of dabchicks in the South I is stated to have been at Lake Fergus, Eglinton Valley, in 1941 (Heather & Robertson 1996). Heather (1988) reviewed all South I dabchick records and this breeding record was attributed to Sibson who reported on 12 Jun 1941 "a pair with small riding young". Heather (1988) also includes a record from the New Zealand – American Fiordland Expedition which recorded several dabchicks in 1949, including "two with a young, possibly at Three Duck Lake" (Poole 1951). I enquired of Hugh Robertson why this record had been omitted from Heather & Robertson (1996) and

Received 19 Dec 2012; accepted 30 Jun 2013

Correspondence: cpetyt@xtra.co.nz

he replied that Heather had written the dabchick account, but he presumed it was because the records in Poole (1951) "were vague reports from other members of the expedition and lack detail to show that the birds in question were indeed all dabchicks and not Australasian little grebes (*Tachybaptus novaehollandiae*) nor hoary-headed grebes (*P. poliocephalus*) which may not have been considered possible at that time" (H. Robertson, *pers. comm.*). Heather (1988) detailed a number of records of dabchicks on the South I through the 1950s, including a few of pairs (*e.g.*, at Lake Kaniere where young were seen in 1940) and the last certain sighting at Lake Gunn in Mar 1964. Two museum specimens were collected in 1956, one being a "sub-adult" and the other a "first year bird". Heather (1988) commented that "it is conceivable that these two birds were stragglers from the normal dispersal in the southern North Island, but they could have come from Fiordland."

Heather (1988) notes that no dabchicks were reported in the South I during the intensive surveys between 1969 and 1979 for the Atlas of Bird Distribution (Bull *et al.* 1985) and it appears certain that the dabchick became extinct in the South I during the 1960s. On 17 Jun 1987, a party of ornithologists, including Heather, saw a dabchick at Lake Elterwater, Marlborough, in company with a hoary-headed grebe, and it was this sighting that prompted Heather (1988) to research earlier South I dabchick records.

A previously unknown South I dabchick sighting should be recorded here, even though it turned out to be a case of mistaken identity. In Sep 1975 the Nelson Evening Mail (*Nelson Evening Mail* 11 Sep 1975) reported: "A pair of dabchicks has been discovered on a small lake in the Rockville area ... the birds were sighted by a society member and later confirmed by a Ranger." Enquiries (D. Cooper, *pers. comm.*) found this news was taken from the Nelson Acclimatisation Society Annual Report (31 Aug 1975) and the birds were seen by Bruce Ferguson whilst duck-shooting at Druggan's Dam, so the sighting was probably in May 1975. Ferguson contacted society ranger, Doug Zumbach, and they returned to the dam, where Zumbach confirmed the record. However, Zumbach was perhaps aware of his lack of expertise as he contacted Brian Bell, Wildlife Service Officer, to confirm the record. Bell visited the dam in Mar 1976 and identified the 2 birds as Australasian little grebes. (B. Bell, *pers. comm.*; Walker 1987).

After the 1987 record there was a gap in further observations of dabchicks in the South I until 2001, but there have been a series of recent sightings in Marlborough and Nelson culminating in the breeding at Lake Killarney. The first recent record was at Taylor Dam, near Blenheim, on 21 Oct 2001;

this bird later got caught and drowned in a net (Medway 2002). The second bird was seen on a small dam at Puramahoi, Golden Bay, on 30 Mar 2006, but did not stay long (*pers. obs.*; Anon 2008). A dabchick was seen on several occasions on a sewage settling pond at Wakapuaka, Nelson, between 30 May and 13 Oct 2010 (Peter Field, *pers. comm.*; Miskelly *et al.* 2011) with further sightings there in Jul 2011, Sep 2012 and May 2013 (Gail Quayle, *pers. comm.*). In addition there were 2 probable sightings, not submitted to the RAC, near Mapua, Nelson, in late Apr 2008 (Steve Wood, *pers. comm.*) and another unsubmitted sighting at Wairau sewage ponds near Blenheim in 2010 (S. Wood, *pers. comm.*).

The dabchicks remained at Lake Killarney through the winter of 2012, though the young birds disappeared, hopefully dispersing. On 30 Oct 2012, a chick was seen riding on one of the parents, and was later photographed by Willie Cook, so the same birds, presumably, bred for a second season (Helen Kingston & Willie Cook, *pers. comm.*).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Murray Gavin for informing me about the dabchicks on Lake Killarney, and Patsy Garrett, Richard Stocker, Don Cooper, Willie Cook and Helen Kingston for help with observations and information. Thanks too to the Nelson Fish and Game Society for checking old files about the mistaken 1975 record, and to an anonymous reviewer.

LITERATURE CITED

- Anon. 2008. Report of OSNZ Rare Birds Committee. *Southern Bird* 36: 5.
- Bull, P.C.; Gaze, P.D.; Robertson, C.J.R. 1985. *The atlas of bird distribution in New Zealand*. Wellington: Ornithological Society of New Zealand.
- Heather, B.D. 1988. A South Island puzzle – Where have all the dabchicks gone? *Notornis* 35: 185-191
- Heather, B.D.; Robertson, H.A. 1996. *Field guide to the birds of New Zealand*. Wellington: Viking Press.
- Medway, D. 2002. Rare Birds Committee – 6 monthly report. *Southern Bird* 10: 5-6.
- Miskelly, C.M.; Scofield, R.P.; Sagar, P.M.; Tennyson, A.J.D.; Bell, B.D.; Bell, E.A. 2011. Vagrant and extralimital bird records accepted by the OSNZ Records Appraisal Committee 2008-2010. *Notornis* 58: 64-70.
- Moon, G. 1979. *The birds around us. New Zealand birds, their habits and habitats*. Heinemann (NZ) Ltd.
- Oliver, W.R.B. 1955. *New Zealand birds*. 2nd ed. Reed
- Poole, A.L. 1951. Preliminary report of the New Zealand – American Fiordland Expedition. *DSIR Bulletin* 103
- Rare Birds Committee. 2005. Report of Rare Birds Committee. *Southern Bird* 21: 5.
- Walker, K. 1987. *Wildlife in the Nelson Region*. New Zealand Wildlife Service.

Keywords first breeding record; New Zealand dabchick; South Island; *Poliocephalus rufopectus*