

# BIRDS FROM A PALMERSTON NORTH GARDEN

By ROB and GILLIAN GUEST

In 1987 we described the birds observed from our garden in Te Kuiti during the early 1980s (*Notornis* 34: 59-64). Following a brief sojourn in Rotorua we moved to Palmerston North in late May 1987 and from June 1987 to July 1992 inclusive we again kept a record of all bird species seen and heard in or from the garden. We described the method and rationale for our monthly bird recording system in 1987 (*op. cit.*) and we continued to maintain the same system in Palmerston North. The period of recording in Palmerston North (62 months) was similar to the period in Te Kuiti (67 months). This was again long enough for us to become very familiar with the birds in the district and to allow seasonal trends to become apparent.

The garden in Palmerston North was flat, of average size (c.1000 m<sup>2</sup>) with a number of reasonable-sized trees, lawns, vegetable garden and rampant hop and kiwifruit! The garden was not particularly attractive for birds but it backed on to school playing fields and was situated in the suburb of Riverdale – barely 400 m from the Manawatu River.

TABLE 1 — Relative occurrence of birds in a Palmerston North Garden, June 1987 to July 1992.

SPECIES	Months When Observed(%)
Blackbird, House Sparrow, Starling, Silvereye, Grey Warbler	100
Song Thrush, White-backed Magpie	98
Fantail, Goldfinch, Southern Black-backed Gull	97
Spur-winged Plover	95
Chaffinch	90
Mallard/Grey Duck	82
Pied Stilt	74
Black Shag	69
Welcome Swallow	52
Redpoll	42
Little Shag	29
Morepork, Australasian Harrier	23
Rook	19
White-faced Heron, Yellowhammer	16
Greenfinch	15
Tui	13
Shining Cuckoo	8
Black Swan, Kingfisher, Caspian Tern	5
Skylark	3
Long-tailed Cuckoo, Black-fronted Dotterel	2

During the time we made observations from the garden we recorded 32 species of bird – a total remarkably similar to that for Te Kuiti (33). Table 1 lists these species and the percentage of months in which each was recorded. Five species were noted every month, including the native Grey Warbler and Silvereye. An additional seven species were nearly as regular – only on the occasional month were they not recorded. There were also half a dozen vagrant species recorded which were only observed a few times during the years. Of significance is the fact that about a quarter of the species observed were associated with the river and/or associated wetlands.

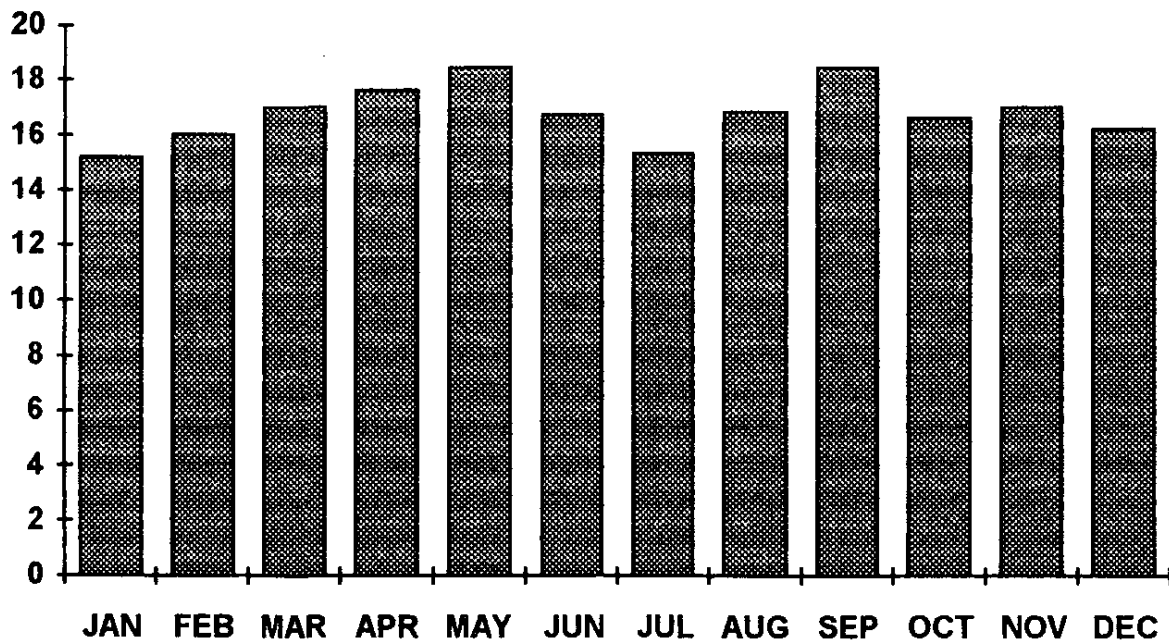


FIGURE 1 — Average number of species observed each month from a Palmerston North garden, June 1987 - July 1992

The number of species observed varied throughout the year (Figure 1). The variation in the number of species observed each month was far less than in Te Kuiti (13-20 c.f. 11-25). In contrast to the clear pattern of few species in autumn and most in the spring observed in Te Kuiti, slightly higher numbers of species were observed in the late autumn and early spring in Palmerston North, with lower numbers in mid-winter and mid-summer.

Despite the similar number of species observed throughout the year, some individual species did show marked seasonal variation in occurrence. Figures 2 and 3 show the trends in occurrence of some species. Those recorded only during the warmer months were the Shining Cuckoo, as expected, and also the Redpoll. The latter showed a particular affinity towards the silver birch trees in the garden. By way of contrast, the Little Shag was not seen at all in December and January but was observed, sparingly, during the rest of the year. Rooks were observed only in autumn and winter when they seemed to have regular flight lines and times over the garden and were readily located by their loud calls. Winter visitors were the Yellowhammer and Tui – the observed pattern from the garden reinforced similar observations elsewhere in the city. The Tui were particularly attracted to winter-flowering trees and later in the year to the

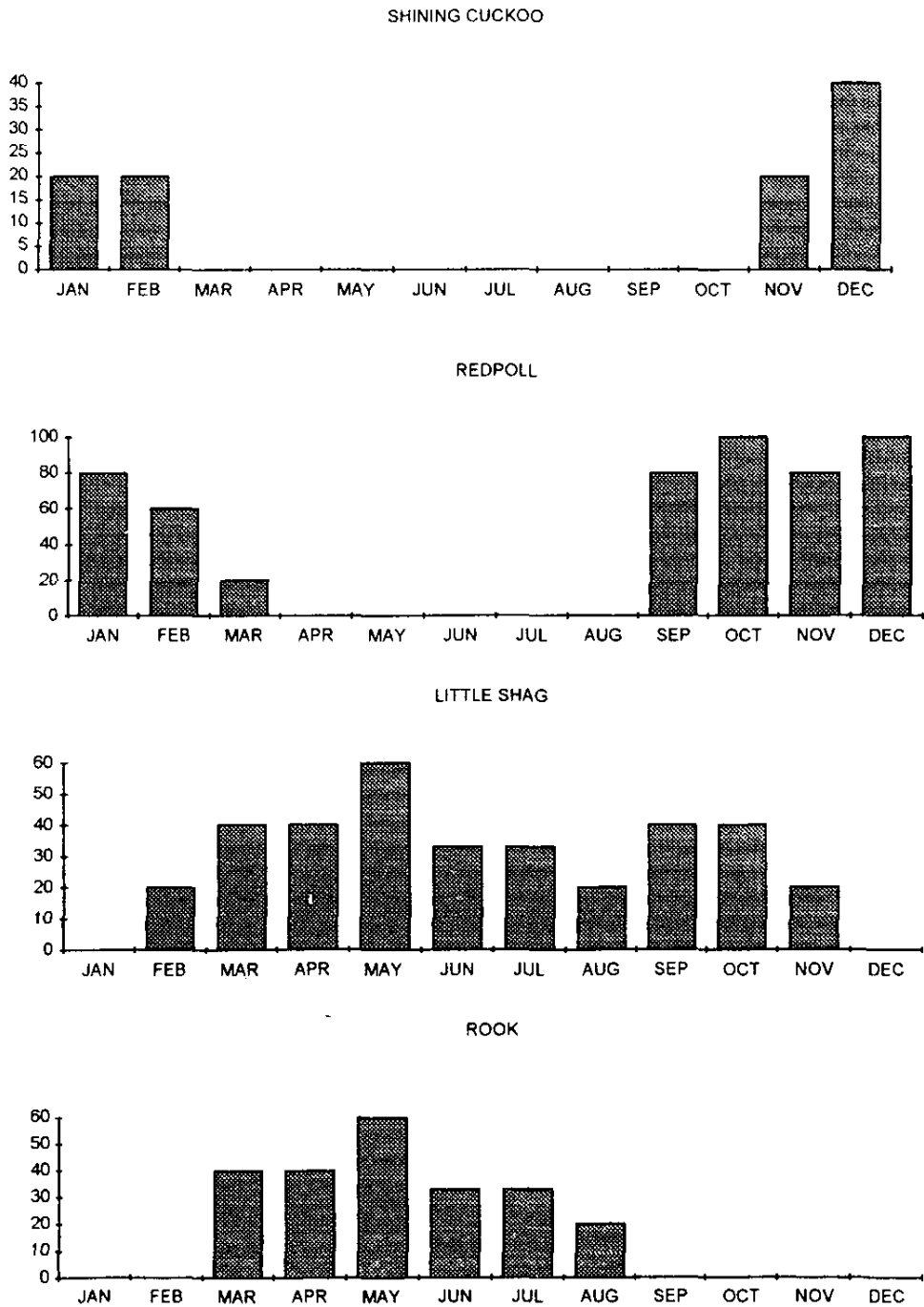


FIGURE 2 — Occurrence, by month, of four species recorded from a Palmerston North garden, June 1987 - July 1992

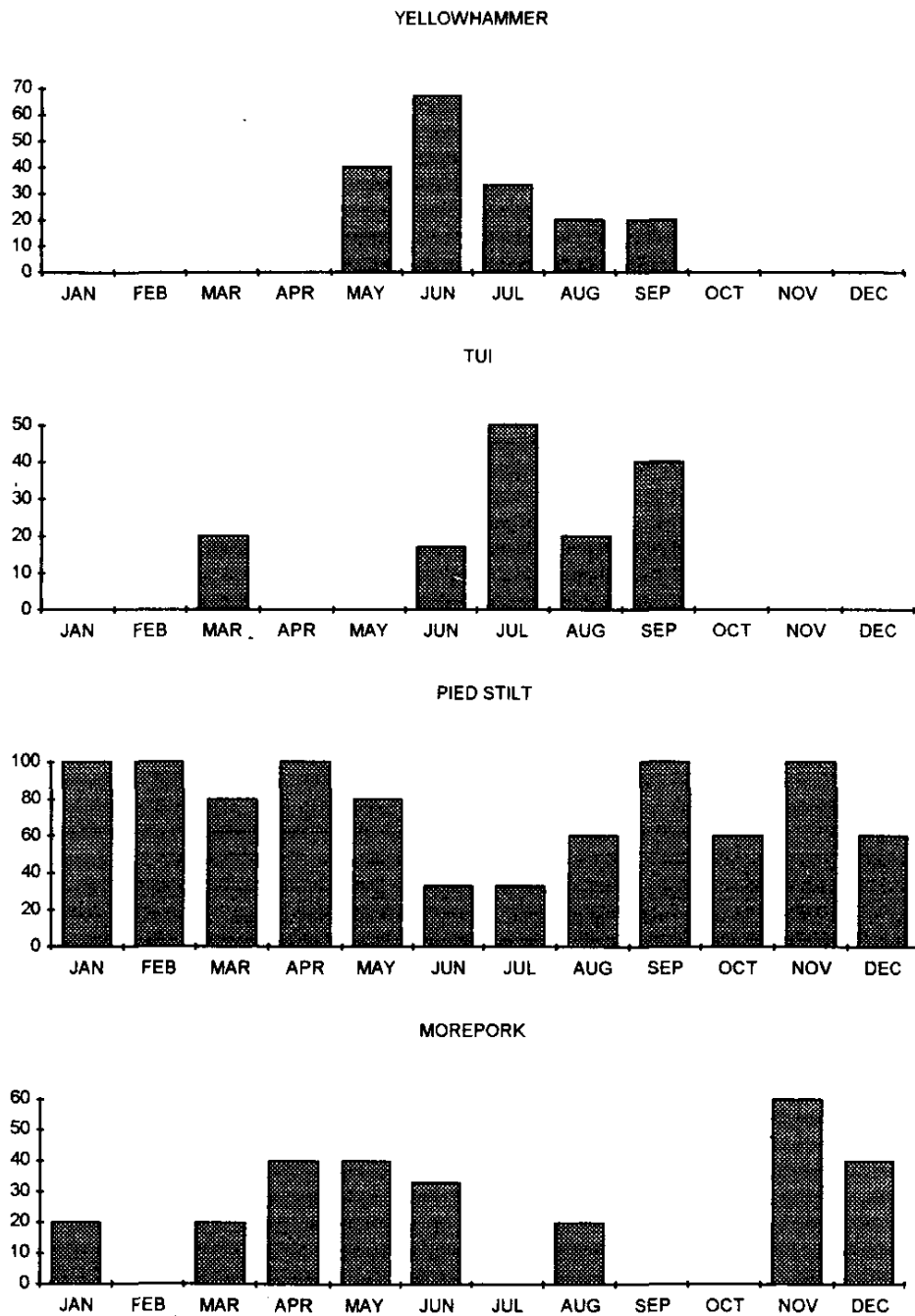


FIGURE 3 — Occurrence, by month, of four species recorded from a Palmerston North garden, June 1987 - July 1992

kowhai bloom. The less frequent observations of Pied Stilts during the winter months were indicative of the lower numbers noted on the Manawatu River bed at this time of year. The seasonal observations of Morepork are included to illustrate the lack of any obvious pattern. Moreporks were not common in the garden but, as we found in Te Kuiti, the pattern of occurrence in the vicinity of the garden was not readily explicable.

There were few extra species that we might have expected to record from the garden. Only Hedgesparrow, Bellbird and NZ Pigeon were regularly encountered elsewhere in the suburbs of the city and might have occurred in the vicinity of our garden.

We must again emphasise the limited conclusions that can result from a simple study such as this, but we commend the habit of regular recording of garden birds as a means of gaining a fascinating insight into your local avifauna!

R & G.P. GUEST *c/o Forest Enterprise, 1A Grosvenor Terrace, York YO3 7BD, England*



## SHORT NOTE

### Notes on the nesting and longevity of Whiteheads

While studying Whiteheads (*Mohoua albicilla*) on Little Barrier Island, Hauraki Gulf (McLean & Gill 1988, Gill & McLean 1992), I collected some incidental data on breeding that I summarise here. A recent recapture of a banded bird has increased the known longevity of Whiteheads.

#### **Nest size and construction**

An abandoned nest (Auckland Museum B2021) had an outside diameter of 100 mm and an outside depth of 90 mm. The cup was 45 mm deep and 50 mm in diameter. The body of the nest was made of fine grass and leaf skeletons, lined first with tree fern fibres and then feathers (including those of parakeets *Cyanoramphus* sp.).

#### **Incubation**

In October 1983, from 6 m distance I watched incubation at Nest WH4, which was 2 m above ground in the densely vegetated understorey beneath tall forest. (It was built precariously on leaf litter that had collected along the midrib of an upright frond of nikau *Rhopalostylis sapida*.) The birds were not banded, but in Whiteheads incubation is by the primary female alone (McLean & Gill 1988). I watched the nest for 362 min between 1000 h and 1630 h on 18 and 20 October. The nest held three eggs, which hatched on 21 or 22 October.