

Southland's Estuaries and Coastal Wetlands

Areas of international importance

The waters, mudflats and marginal vegetation of Southland's large tidal estuaries and coastal lagoons (Jacobs River Estuary, New River Estuary, Bluff Harbour and Awarua Bay, Waituna Lagoon and Toetoes Harbour) make up the most important bird habitat areas in Southland.

More than eighty bird species have been sighted in these places, 65 of which are dependent on the estuarine environment for part or all of their life.

Southland's estuaries rank alongside Farewell Spit and Lake Ellesmere as the top three wading bird habitats in the South Island.

They are internationally important because from spring to late autumn they become the feeding and breeding grounds for thousands of migratory waders from the northern hemisphere.

Awarua Bay



Coastal wetlands in Southland are mainly bogs rather than swamps. Bogs contain constantly saturated, stagnant and infertile water, and are characterised by peat and a few well-adapted plants like sphagnum moss. In contrast, swamps are usually fed by rivers and have a flow of water and nutrients through them. Flax and *Carex secta* are common swamp plants.

Many different invertebrates occur in Southland's coastal wetlands and three species of skinks have been recorded at Tiwai Peninsula.

Despite their importance as wildlife habitat, wetlands and estuaries are often under-appreciated and degraded through rubbish dumping, agricultural run-off, reclamation, trampling by stock, drainage, fire, extraction of sphagnum moss, and introduction of *Spartina*.

Discover Southland's wet places

Bluff Hill / Motupōhue

The view from the summit of Bluff Hill / Motupohue reveals how dominant estuaries are in the landscape of Southland, and why together they provide such an important habitat for wildlife.

It is possible to see the pattern of vegetation around the head of Awarua Bay and Waituna Lagoon - a natural mosaic caused by differences in salinity and water level, and the regeneration sequences following fires.

The first European explorers of Bluff Harbour identified the trading potential of vast areas of flax.

Tiwai Peninsula, now the site of giant aluminium smelting sheds, was once the site of a workshop where Maori honed tools from flaky, argillite rock. The estuary was an important source of food and a transport route.

Awarua Bay

To go bird watching at Awarua Bay travel towards the Tiwai smelter from Invercargill until the bridge over Awarua Bay. Turn left and follow the road to a parking area at Muddy Creek.

To reach feeding areas and roosts walk around the head of the bay and be prepared for some knee-deep wading. Although birds can be seen at any stage of the tide, the best viewing is gained over high tide (1 to 1.5 hours after Bluff).

During normal high tides wading birds roost on two or three raised portions of the mudflats, but at times of severe storm or extremely high tides they may find temporary feeding or roosting areas on nearby pastures.

Awarua Bay is of particular interest because most years it holds the second highest number of waders and a greater number of species than other sites in Southland. It also attracts rare visitors to New Zealand such as Siberian tattler, greenshank and sanderling. Most migratory waders are present only from October to late March but some of the more common species are present through the winter.

A small population of the endangered southern subspecies of New Zealand dotterel frequents the south shore of the bay in autumn and winter.

The marginal saltmarsh and adjoining peatland vegetation provides feeding areas and nesting cover for three other threatened species in the area - Australasian bittern, marsh crane and spotless fernbird.

Waders and waterfowl depend on the mudflat areas, where there is an abundance of worms, crustacea, and small shellfish. Birds such as terns, herons, and shags feed on small fish.

Bring binoculars or a telescope. Be prepared for variable weather in any season - take a wind and waterproof parka, overtrousers, hat, gloves and sunblock cream.

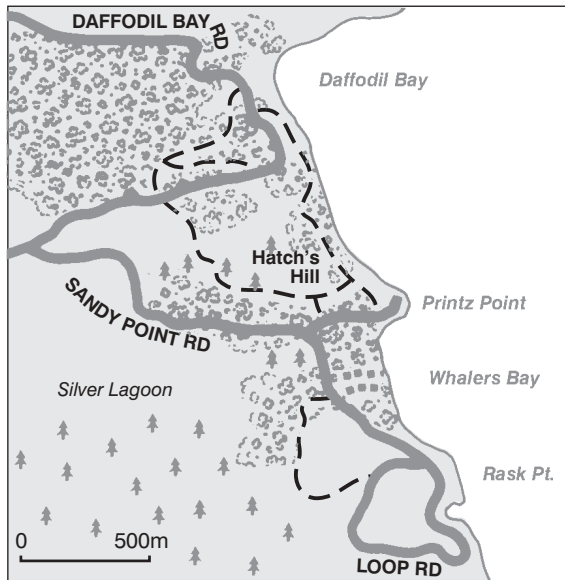
Published by:
Department of Conservation
PO Box 743
Invercargill
February 2002

Crown Copyright



Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

Sandy Point Walks



Waimatuku Mouth Wetlands

These relatively small but important permanent wetlands are situated just behind the Oreti Beach sand dunes, immediately east of the Waimatuku River mouth. They are accessible from the north end of Oreti Beach or by turning off the Invercargill - Riverton highway at Waimatuku.

The wetlands are protected by a QEII covenant. They have recently been restored to their original water level, and are the only remaining example of a chain of small coastal wetlands which occurred between Invercargill and Riverton/Aparima.

A wide range of water fowl and birds, shags and waders are regularly present. The adjacent Waimatuku River mouth provides additional interest for bird watchers.

Sandy Point Walks

A network of walking tracks around Sandy Point provides an opportunity to view the vegetation types which grow around estuarine areas. At low tide shellfish and mud crabs can be seen on the mudflats. Salt-tolerant herbs and rushes grow close to the tide mark, merging with manuka shrublands and totara-dominated coastal forest.

The walking tracks between Daffodil Bay and Hatch's Hill provide good viewpoints over the New River Estuary. The estuary supports the highest numbers of migratory waders of any of Southland's estuaries. Though their roosting areas are mainly on the opposite side around raised shell banks, good views of feeding waders are usually possible on receding tides, especially turnstones and godwits.

Silver Lagoon, which forms the eye of Sandy Point peninsula, is a favoured habitat for swans and ducks.

Waituna Lagoon

Waituna Lagoon has been inscribed on the list of wetlands of international importance. The lagoon is only occasionally open to the sea and its brackish waters are important habitat for birds, native fish and trout. The surrounding wetlands have some unusual plant associations, like the cushion plant *Donatia* which normally grows in subalpine areas. In the cold, peaty conditions low growing moor-like vegetation dominates. Manuka and turpentine shrub overtops wire rush and tangle fern. Native orchids and the insectivorous sundews and bladderworts, are common. The southern shore gentian flowers in profusion in late summer along the shingle banks of the coast.

Access into the peatlands area is difficult although some of the cushion bog and other communities can be viewed near the road end at the head of Awarua Bay.

Waituna Lagoon can be reached by road at several points. To get to the outlet it is necessary to walk along the coast from Waituna Lagoon Road (1.5 hours) or along the beach after crossing the head of Awarua Bay (2.5 hours). At high tide or when the outlet is closed kayaks or small power boats can be used to explore the margins of the lagoon.

Safety Watch
0800 999 005
Reports any safety hazards



Protect plants and animals

Remove rubbish

Bury toilet waste

Keep streams and lakes clean

Take care with fires

Camp carefully

Keep to the track

Consider others

Respect our cultural heritage

Enjoy your visit

Toitu te whenua
(Leave the land undisturbed)

A list of birds found at Awarua Bay

Wading Birds

White-faced Heron (*Ardea novaehollandiae*). Present in moderate numbers throughout the year. Regular mudflat feeder.

South Island Pied Oystercatcher (*Torea*) (*Haematopus ostralegus*). Present throughout the year. Abundant in summer and autumn.

Variable Oystercatcher (*Torea*) (*H. unicolor*). A few black phase birds generally present throughout the year.

Hybrid Black/Pied Stilt (*H.sp.*). One record of two hybrid birds.

Australasian Pied Stilt (*Poaka*) (*Himantopus himantopus*). Present in good numbers throughout the year.

New Zealand Dotterel (*Tuturiwhatu*) (*Charadrius obscurus*). Breeds on Stewart Island. Up to 30% of the total southern population present in autumn and winter.

Banded Dotterel (*C. bicinctus*). Breeds in small numbers. Large summer and autumn flocks.

Mongolian Dotterel (*C. mongolus*). A single record of this species.

Wrybill (*Ngutuparore*) (*Anarhynchus frontalis*). Occasionally recorded.

Pacific Golden Plover (*Pluvialis fulva*). Breeds northeast Siberia and western Alaska. Regular summer visitor.

Grey Plover (*P. squatarola*). Breeds northern Europe, Asia and America. Uncommon visitor to New Zealand. Two records from Awarua Bay. More frequently seen at the west end of Waituna Lagoon.

Spur-winged Plover (*Vanellus miles*). A few usually present.

Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*). Breeds in northern Europe, Asia and America. Second most common migratory wader. Some birds over-winter each year.

Lesser Knot (*Huahou*) (*Calidris canutus*). Breeds in arctic Eurasia. Regularly present in moderate numbers, some of winter most years.

Sanderling (*C. alba*). Breeds northern Europe, Asia and America. Occasional summer visitor in low numbers. Seldom recorded elsewhere in Southland.

Curlw Sandpiper (*C. ferruginea*). Breeds arctic Asia. Regular summer visitor in low numbers.

Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*C. acuminata*). Breeds northeast Siberia. Regular summer visitor in low numbers.

Pectoral Sandpiper (*C. melanotos*). One record of a single bird.

Red-necked Stint (*C. ruficollis*). Breeds northeast Siberia and northwest Alaska. Occasional summer visitor in moderate numbers.

Eastern Broad-billed Sandpiper (*Limicola falcinellus*). Breeds arctic Europe and Asia. Rare visitor to New Zealand. One record from Awarua Bay.

Eastern Curlew (*Numenius madagascariensis*). Breeds northeast Asia. Occasional summer visitor in low numbers.

Asiatic Whimbrel (*N. phaeopus variegata*). Breeds northeast Asia. One record of two birds.

American Whimbrel (*N. p. hudsonicus*). Breeds northern Canada and Alaska, migrating to Central and South America. Occasionally strays to New Zealand. A very rare summer visitor.

Eastern Bar-tailed Godwit (*Kuaka*) (*Limosa lapponica*). Breeds eastern Siberia and north Alaska. Most abundant of the migratory waders. Some birds over-winter each year.

Hudsonian Godwit (*L. haemastica*). Breeds northwest Canada and Alaska. One record of two birds.

Siberian (Grey-tailed) Tattler (*Tringa brevipes*). Breeds northern Asia. Regular summer visitor in low numbers (up to 5). Seldom recorded elsewhere in Southland. Has been known to over-winter.

Greenshank (*T. nebularia*). Breeds subarctic Eurasia. Occasional summer visitor seldom recorded elsewhere in Southland.

Marsh Sandpiper (*T. stagnatilis*). Breeds eastern Europe to Mongolia. Confirmed sighting in November 1984 was first in Southland.

Terek Sandpiper (*T. terek*). Breeds northern Europe and Asia. Rare summer visitor in low numbers.

Waterfowl

Black Swan (*Cygnus atratus*). Regularly present but numbers fluctuate seasonally.

Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*). Present in high numbers throughout the year.

Grey Duck (*Parera*) (*A. superciliosa*). Occasionally present in low numbers.

Grey Teal (*Tete*) (*A. gracilis*). A nomadic species periodically recorded in low numbers.

New Zealand Shoveler (*Kuruwhengu*) (*A. rhynchos*). Present in moderate numbers.

Sooty Shearwater (*Titi*) (*Puffinus griseus*). Occasionally seen feeding near head of the bay.

Other Species

Black shag (*Koau*) (*Phalacrocorax carbo*). Present throughout the year in moderate numbers. Breeds in Waituna wetlands.

Little shag (*Kawaupaka*) (*P. melanoleucos*). Abundant throughout year. Breeds in Awarua and Waituna swamps.

Stewart Island shag (*Leucocarbo chalconotus*). Present in good numbers throughout the year. Breeds in Bluff Harbour.

Australasian Bittern (*Matuku*) (*Botaurus poiciloptilus*). Solitary birds recorded in marginal vegetation, especially on Tiwai Peninsula.

Spotless Crake (*Puweto*) (*Porzana tabuensis*). Recorded in marginal vegetation at head of bay. Rare in Southland.

Marsh Crake (*P. pusilla*). Present in low numbers in marginal vegetation.

Gull-billed Tern (*Gelochelidon nilotica*). Breeds Northern Hemisphere and Australia. Rare visitor. At least two records from bay.

Caspian Tern (*Taranui*) (*Hydroprogne caspia*). Present in low numbers. Has bred at some sites about the bay.

Black-fronted Tern (*Tarapiroe*) (*Sterna albobriata*). Present in low numbers, especially in mid-summer and autumn.

White-fronted Tern (*Tara*) (*S. striata*). Resident. Formerly bred on spit by causeway but now largely displaced by black-backed gulls.

Eastern Little Tern (*S. albigrons*). Breeds eastern Asia. Rare visitor.

South Island Fernbird (*Mata*) (*Bowdleria punctata*). Resident and breeding in marginal vegetation at head of bay and on Tiwai peninsula.

Southern black-backed gull (*Karoro*) (*Larus dominicanus*). Present throughout the year in high numbers. Breeding colony on spit by causeway.

Red-billed gull (*Tarapunga*) (*L. novaehollandiae*). Present throughout the year in moderate numbers. Odd pairs known to breed on spit by causeway.