

SOUTH KAIPARA LAKES SURVEY AND DABCHICK CENSUS

FOR 25TH APRIL 2017

COMPILED BY DENISE POYNER – AUGUST 2017

Welcome to the first report of the South Kaipara Lakes Survey and Dabchick Census. I plan to contribute a report for each year that I am the co-ordinator. I'd like them to be easy to read and informative.

The survey was started in 1969. It is run by the Ornithological Society of New Zealand (aka Birds New Zealand), and is particular to the Auckland region of this organisation.

We hold the survey annually on only one day of the year being 25th April. We do this regardless of the weather. Volunteers who come along are placed in groups with a knowledgeable birding person to help identify the birds they are seeing. At the end of the count we enjoy a barbecue hosted by South Head resident, Susan Wilson and supplied by South Kaipara Landcare (SKL).

The volunteer group is a mix of SKL members, Birds NZ members, South Head residents and interested parties. As we have sixteen active sites with water in them, it is great to have a good number of volunteers. Over the years the volunteer group has had its fluctuations on the day. I see in 2004, there were 19 volunteers, and in 2017 we had 33. That is probably the biggest group of volunteers thus far.

Many sites are now dry, however, they remain on the list of potential sites to visit given that a pine forest is milled approximately every twenty five years. Woodhill Forest is a big taker of water hence the notable dryness of 9 lakes.

The count covers three things. Firstly, we are counting New Zealand dabchicks and their close relative the australasian little grebe. We are looking for adults and juveniles of each of these species. Secondly, we count other wetland birds such as all species of shags, white-faced heron, bittern, black swan, canada geese and feral geese, a variety of ducks, australasian shoveller, teal and New Zealand scaup. Finally, we also make note of the presence of any other bird that is related to the wetland area such as pukeko, australasian harrier, stilts, terns, oystercatchers, and common passerine.

Statistics are generally meaningless unless there is a scientific test supporting research. On the other hand, it is interesting to see how populations of a species can change over time. As this is a New Zealand dabchick census, and we count its close relative the australasian little grebe, I'd like to show you the count from 2011 to 2017 for these two birds.

2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
24	29	19	13	14	28	31

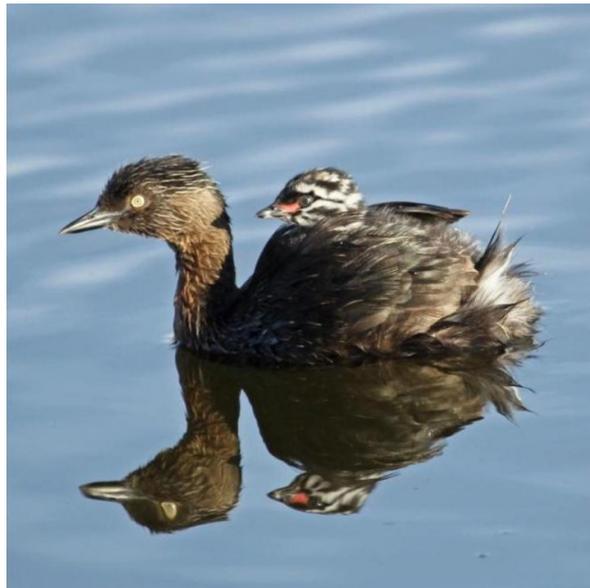
The record I have dates back to 2001. A quick look at the count for dabchick and grebe shows we counted approximately, or over, 100 birds from 2001 to 2006 when there was a big decrease in 2007 to 53. Since then there has been a gradual decline in the numbers on our lakes. What's doing that? Several factors can be considered – rainfall, food availability due to habitat changes, pest control or lack thereof, external disturbance such as boats, jet skiers and water skiers, and water quality. External disturbance is an important factor due to the species nesting in a pile of aquatic vegetation on the waterway. (Szabo, 2017).

I see a significant change in the overall count between 2016 and 2017, where we counted 1351 birds of all species in 2016 and only 721 in 2017. It was pointed out at the June 2017 SKL AGM that the sudden shift downwards is likely to do with the rainfall we had up until census day being a wet start to Autumn and rain at times over the latter part of summer. This is however a little bit tricky in assumption as a one day count each year does not give an accurate sense of population over time. If for example we were to count 4 times a year, each count may yield completely different results and explanations of why things are like they are for that count. Every year is a surprise. Let's hope the numbers pop back up again.

Speaking of habitat changes and pest control, it was good to learn three property owners were making effort in that regard. I saw a dig out of a lake had taken place with a view to bringing in more water. As a result of the work achieved, pukeko were attempting to feed in the trench created by the dig out. I heard of a property owner clearing pest weeds and yet another property owner managing pest animals such as hedgehogs, rats, stoats, possums, ferrets and feral cats.

Focus on New Zealand Dabchick

I thought it would be educational to focus on a species each year. For this year, I'd like to focus on the New Zealand dabchick. Here are some short facts about the species.



Scientific name:	Order: Podicipediformes Family: Podicipedidae Genus and species: Poliocephalus rufopectus They have been around a long time. G R Gray named them in 1843. (Wikipedia, 2017)
Other names:	In Maori, they are called several names. Those names appear to be localised. For example, in the Hokianga they are called taihoropi. In the Waikato, they are known as taratimoho. Other names are weweia and totokipio and New Zealand Grebe. (Szabo, 2017)
Population and conservation:	1900 – 2000 individuals. Endemic, near threatened, recovering. (Wikipedia, 2017)
Description	A small to medium sized bird belonging to the grebe family. They are diving birds. Long necked. Can change their buoyancy. Brown-black in colour with a rufous red breast (in breeding season) and yellow eye. White underfeathers including end of the tail. Thick olive-green legs with lobed feet. Feet are yellow on the inner side and edges. Short black bill. (Szabo, 2017) About 29cm in length and 250 grams in weight. (Wikipedia, 2017)
Where found:	Small lakes and inlets from Northland to north of the South Island. Stopped breeding in the South Island in 1941, however there has been a sighting of a pair in Takaka in 2012 and in Blenheim in 2015. Farm lakes and man-made waterways appear to be an important habitat given loss of natural habitat. They favour shallow water with dense vegetation on small freshwater lakes and pools, sand dune lakes, lagoons, and larger inland lakes up to the size of Lake Taupo. (Szabo, 2017) For 2017, the stronghold waterways in the South Kaipara area are Kereta Lake, and Tupare Lake at the Marie Neverman Reserve.
Breeding:	All year round with territorial displays in June-July and egg laying in the August to February period. Nests are made of aquatic material about 1m deep in construction. Lay 2-3 bluish eggs that become stained brown in the nest. Incubation is over 22 or 23 days. Chicks are reared over 70 days. They ride on the parents back for the first 1-2 weeks. (Szabo, 2017). Chicks are capable of moving around straight after hatching (precocial). (Wikipedia, 2017)
Food:	Aquatic invertebrates such as insects and larvae, fish and crayfish, shellfish, leeches. (Szabo, 2017)

References:

Szabo, M.J. 2013 [updated 2017]. New Zealand dabchick. In Miskelly, C.M. (ed.) *New Zealand Birds Online*. www.nzbirdsonline.org.nz. Accessed 10 July 2017.

Wikipedia. 2017. New Zealand Grebe. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Zealand_grebe. Accessed 10 July 2017.

Photo Credit:

Smith, Roger. 2017. New Zealand Dabchick carrying chick on its back. Photo taken at Waikanae Lagoons. www.nzbirdsonline.org.nz. Accessed 13 August 2017.