

Background information for the Ashley-Rakahuri estuary story writing competition January 2025 *(all images thanks to Group member, Grant Davey)*



The Ashley estuary / Te Aka Aka
'An ecological gem'

The first words on the sign at the Waikuku carpark, welcoming visitors to the Ashley estuary are 'An ecological gem.' This is indeed true, for the Ashley Estuary / Te Aka Aka should be regarded as the jewel in the biodiversity crown of the Waimakariri District council.

The birds are particularly notable – see image below (with species list alongside - read as a book).



White heron/kotuku, white-faced heron, wrybill/ngutupare, banded dotterel/pohowera, godwit/kuaka, stint, variable oystercatcher/torea, black-fronted tern/tarapirohe, pied shag/karuhiruhi, white-fronted tern/tara, black stilt/kaki, terek sandpiper, black-fronted dotterel and royal spoonbill.

Top-class habitat. The estuary is one of the most important habitats for migratory shore birds in the South Island. This is due to its significant expanses of tidal mudflats compared to other east coast river mouths. What makes the estuary extra special is the variety of bird species it attracts, combined with its ready accessibility. Apart from the passing migrants, it also acts as a staging post for braided river birds (such as wrybill/ngutu pare) before and after they breed on the braided rivers of Canterbury. Several bird species nest at the estuary – two of the most often seen are the banded dotterel/pohowera) and variable oystercatcher/torea pango

Threats. The estuary has been a superb bird habitat for 1000s of years, but is currently threatened, resulting in a decline in bird numbers. The major threats are the result of reduced water quality, *predation* by southern black-backed gulls/karoro and various forms of *human disturbance* which are severely impacting the birds.

Reduced water quality. The main pressures on the estuary water quality are the consequence of nutrient and effluent runoff from rural land uses, and stormwater discharges from urban environments.

Karoro. This is a native species, but increasing numbers are breeding at the estuary and predated the eggs and chicks of smaller species. Currently, management aims to reduce this population to an acceptable population size.

Human disturbance is in the form of vehicles, pedestrians, dogs and sometimes planes. This has increased over recent years and is probably the main reason for the decline in bird numbers.

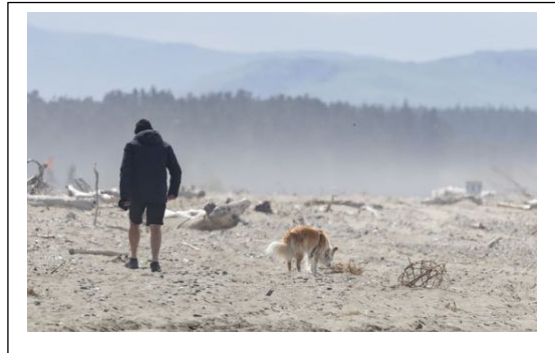
For example, the number of banded dotterel/pohowera breeding pairs on the spit has dropped from 30+ in the 1980s to just 3 today.



Vehicles. The Northern Pegasus Bay Bylaw forbids vehicle access onto the estuary and the spit, plus restricts their use on the beach. However, these rules are too often ignored. In addition, quad bikes and trail bikes can be seen causing disturbance, so also need to be banned.



Dogs. There is a ban on dogs along the entire sandspit north of the Waikuku Beach carpark. Dogs are already prohibited along the edge of the estuary, but this rule has been too often ignored. Dog walking on the beach is permitted, but they must be on a leash. There is considerable international information available about the negative impact dogs have on birds - and shorebirds in particular.



Recreational aircraft. Recreational use of vehicles on the beach is already prohibited. This should be extended to planes and recreational aircraft.



Use of Bylaw. The Bylaw's rules are well intended, but ways need to be explored to improve enforcement. It is common to see vehicles in areas where they are prohibited. Environment Canterbury rangers do a very professional job, but they cannot be in the area nearly enough.

Signage. This needs to be improved. In particular the small signs at the Waikuku end of the sandspit banning dogs from the estuary are very inconspicuous. Large signs need to be installed, and they should include reasons for the ban.



Awareness. Increased effort needs to be made on public education. Residents and visitors need to be made properly aware of the unique environment that is the Ashley estuary – and how to preserve it.

Local involvement. An absolutely key ingredient to improvement of the natural environment of the estuary would be the setting up of a local volunteer group dedicated to improving the situation for birds using the Ashley estuary / Te Aka Aka.