

A large diverse group of birds of estuaries, coasts, riverbeds and farmland. Most are long-legged and feed in or near shallow water. Bill shape is varied; short and stubby in those (e.g. dotterels) that peck from the surface, but longer in those that feed in shallow water (e.g. stilts), or probe deeply (e.g. godwits). Flight strong and direct. Often form flocks while roosting or flying, but disperse to feed. Many species seen in NZ breed in the Arctic and arrive in September, with remnants of breeding plumage, and depart in March, often in breeding plumage. Most subadults and a few adults spend the southern winter here.

**BLACK-FRONTED DOTTEREL** *Charadrius melanops* Locally common native

17 cm, 33 g. Distinctive small dotterel with *slow jerky flight, black wingtips and metallic 'pit' flight call*. Upperparts mottled light brown with chestnut shoulder patch; black forehead, vertical patch onto crown, eyeline and *V-shaped breast band*; white eyebrow, side of neck and underparts. *Bill bright red, tipped black*; legs dull pink. Sexes alike. Juvenile lacks breast band, black forehead and shoulder patch. **Habitat:** Recently colonised from Australia. Breeds on riverbeds (especially near backwaters), gravel pits and bare ground. Form flocks after breeding, especially on lake margins and damp paddocks. **Breeding:** Aug–Mar. [Sp 178]



**PLOVERS, DOTTERELS and LAPWINGS**  
Charadriidae

About 65 species, most of which are migratory. There are about 29 plovers and dotterels, of which 5 (formerly 6) breed in New Zealand and 8 visit as migrants from the Northern Hemisphere; 26 lapwings, 1 of which breeds in New Zealand. Some authorities place the Red-kneed Dotterel with the lapwings rather than the plovers.

In New Zealand, the terms plover and dotterel mean the same thing; there is no clear distinction. All are plumpish with a thick, short neck, short tail, small, rounded head

with a high forehead and bill shorter than the head, pointed and slightly swollen at the tip. The plumage is a blend of black, white, brown and grey, sometimes more colourful in breeding plumage. They often have a bold pattern in flight. They have a characteristic 'walk and stop' way of feeding.

Lapwings tend to be inland on pasture and around coastal wetlands. They have wattles on the face and spurs on the bend of the wing, and are noisy on the ground and in flight, by night as well as by day.

**178. BLACK-FRONTED DOTTEREL** *Charadrius melanops* Plate 41

**Other name:** Black-fronted Plover (Australia)  
**Size:** 17 cm, 33 g  
**Distribution:** Breed throughout Australia and, since the late 1950s, in New Zealand. They first colonised Hawke's Bay, then spread to Manawatu, Wairarapa and across Cook Strait to Marlborough and South Canterbury in the late 1960s. Now they breed on the shingle riverbeds of the eastern and southern North Island, south of Wairoa and Wanganui,

and are found sparsely in the northeastern South Island and in increasing numbers on the shingle beds of smaller rivers in Canterbury, Otago and Southland. Elsewhere they are seen only as rare non-breeding vagrants, except that a small number regularly visit estuaries in the eastern Bay of Plenty, and a pair bred at Mangere Sewage Ponds in 2002.

When not breeding, most birds stay on

the rivers, but in autumn some move to dried lake beds (e.g. Pukepuke and Omanuka Lagoons), and when river levels rise they gather on nearby muddy places and wetlands such as Whakaki Lagoon, Ahuriri Estuary, Lakes Poukawa, Hatuma and Wairarapa, and Te Whiti sewage ponds near Masterton, Feilding sewage plant, Longburn abattoir sludge ponds (now in disuse). A regular few are in winter on the Bay of Plenty coast, their origin unknown. Some non-breeding flocking in the South Island has begun at Lakes Elterwater and Ellesmere, and at Spider, Wainono and Washdyke Lagoons.

**Population:** c. 1700 in New Zealand. North Island c. 1400 (Hawke's Bay 800, Wairarapa 300, Manawatu 300); South Island c. 300 (Marlborough 50, Canterbury 150, Otago 50, Southland 50).

**Conservation:** Protected uncommon self-introduced native. Black-fronted Dotterels have recently established as a breeding species in New Zealand, and do not seem to compete significantly with any native species.

**Breeding:** Eggs are laid c. 2–3 days apart in August–February, early in Hawke's Bay, where riverbeds are wider, and late in Wairarapa, where floods are common in early summer. The nest is a shallow depression on the ground, usually lined with fine pebbles or wood chips, dry grass and leaves, often

on the shingle ridge nearest to the feeding area. They lay 2–3 khaki eggs (29 x 21 mm), with the grey or cream background obscured by a mass of brown spots, flecks and fine wavy lines. Both sexes incubate for 22–26 days.

**Behaviour:** Some birds remain on territory all year in solitary pairs, but in winter others form loose groups of up to 100 birds. The contact call is a sharp 'pit', more high-pitched and metallic than that of Banded Dotterels and given more often in flight. The threat call is a vigorous rippling 'ree-ree-ree-ree'. The main territorial call is a languid churring 'rrrr-reep' given by the male while circling above its territory in butterfly flight. In the presence of a human intruder, they crouch back-on in the shingle, becoming almost invisible. When more alarmed, they spread and depress their tail, rocking from side to side. They run among stones rather than over them, as other riverbed waders do.

**Feeding:** Diet is mainly molluscs, crustaceans, insects and earthworms, taken by the 'walk or run-stop-peck' typical of plovers. They also foot-tremble, followed by pecking to take prey disturbed by tapping (on hard surfaces) or leg-shaking (over soft soil or mud).

**Reading:** Child, P. & Child, M. 1984. *Notornis* 31: 31–39. Heather, B.D. 1977. *Notornis* 24: 1–8. Tarburton, M.K. 1989. *Notornis* 36: 249–259.