

# Our freshwater friends

By Johanna Knox

Meet some of the colourful characters who live in Aotearoa's lakes, rivers, and wetlands – birds, bugs, and fish.

## Birds

### Rapids riders

Whio – blue ducks – live only where the waters are fast and rough. Those places are too dangerous for most ducks! But whio have big feet for powering through currents, and strong claws for climbing boulders and clinging to rocks while water rushes past.

Each whio has a soft flap around the top of its bill. That stops the hard bits of its bill getting damaged as it yanks delicious bugs off rocks.

Whio don't live anywhere but New Zealand, and there are only two other duck species in the whole world that live in rapid waters.

Whio at Staglands, Akatarua.



Here's a tip: if you see a whio in a river or stream, then you know the water there is healthy and teeming with life. Whio can't live in polluted water. They need it super-clean so it's full of bugs to eat.



A kamana pair reuniting at Lake Wānaka. Photo: Oscar Thomas

### Diving in

Kamana, or Australasian crested grebes, have legs very far back on their bodies – so far back that these fancy-looking birds would keep falling over if they walked much. But once they're in water, watch them go!

Kamana's legs and feet are perfectly designed for diving and chasing fish underwater. They spend almost their whole lives in lakes and wetlands. They even build floating nests, anchored to banks.

The chicks sit on their parents backs and ride across the water until they're big enough to swim themselves.

Like their grebe relatives all around the world, kamana perform spectacular courting displays. Sometimes a pair rises from the water, chest to chest, and dances on the surface! Other times they dive down, and bring up gifts of waterweed for each other.

Australasian grebes live in Australia as well as New Zealand – and they're rare in both countries.

### Perfect tool

If you ever spot a wrybill – ngutuparore – with a beak bent to the left, that will be big news! Their beaks *always* bend to the right.

In fact, wrybills are the only birds in the world with a beak bent sideways at all. This might seem surprising, since it's such a good idea. It helps them reach yummy insect larvae under river stones.

Wrybills spend spring and summer (their breeding season) on braided rivers. Then they fly to the top of the North Island, and its warm ocean harbours, for winter.



Wrybills lay eggs among river stones, where they're camouflaged. How many eggs can you spot here? Photo: John Hill. Wikimedia Commons

### Gull power

There are many species of gull all around the world. They're smart, social, super-adaptable birds. Aotearoa's little tarapuka – black-billed gulls – are no exception, but their population is declining. Even though there are still thousands of them, they're now among the rarest gulls in the world. That's partly because they don't cope with cities as well as other gull species – and they need gravel rivers for breeding.

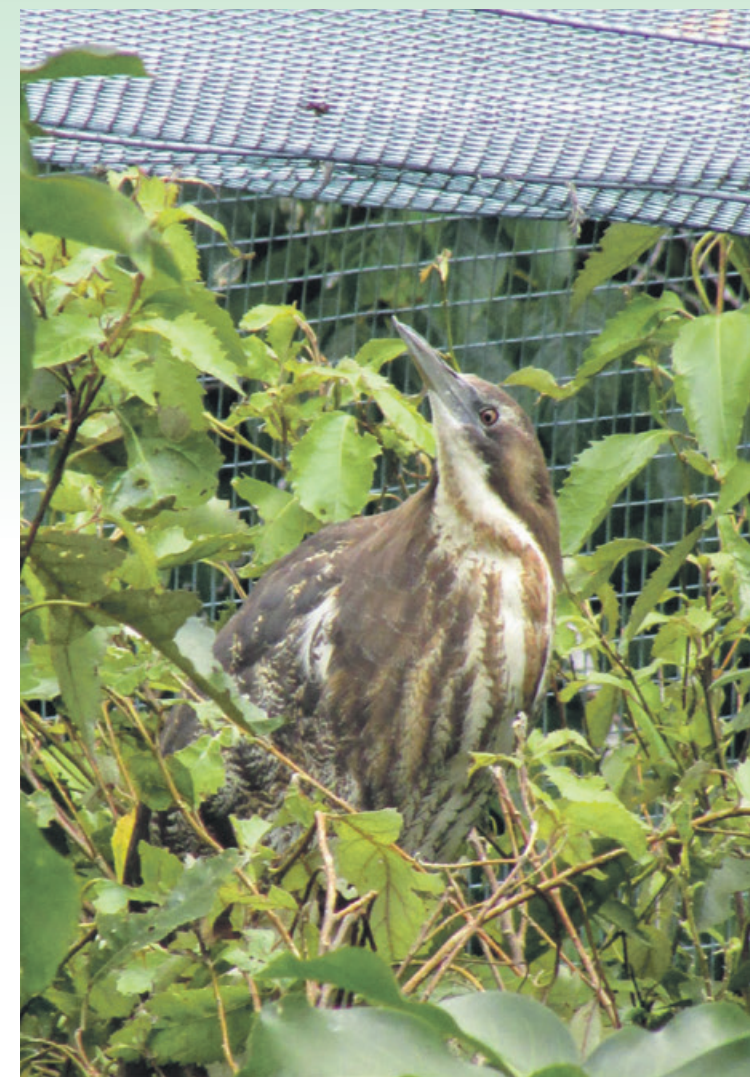
Tarapuka. Photo: Ngamanu images



### Shh! Secret bird!

You don't see matuku (Australasian bitterns) much – mainly because they're the rarest bittern species in the world. Also, even when they are around, they're skilled at hiding.

When they stand among reeds, beaks pointed upwards, swaying slightly with the breeze, they're almost impossible to spot.



A matuku being cared for at Hamilton zoo, after suffering a gunshot wound in the wild. Photo: Oscar Thomas

### What's a braided river?

It's one that has lots of thin channels criss-crossing each other. Aotearoa is one of the world's braided-river hotspots!

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