

Rarer than you might think...

Black-billed gulls breed in large colonies on braided rivers in Southland and near towns like Ashburton and Rangiora in Canterbury, so you might think they're common. However, like black-fronted terns, which also nest in colonies in braided rivers, their numbers have dropped dramatically in the past few years. Today, ever fewer and smaller-sized colonies are producing only a handful—if any—chicks that survive to adulthood. As a consequence, black-billed gulls are just one step from extinction, and black-fronted terns are not far behind.

Why are they nearly extinct?

Black-billed gulls and black-fronted terns evolved to live in the dynamic environment of braided rivers. They lay eggs on open, weed-free gravel, just high enough above the water to escape periodic flooding. Eggs and chicks are brilliantly camouflaged, allowing them to hide 'in plain sight' from native airborne predators such as hawks, black-backed gulls, and the now extinct Haast's eagle. But the natural environment in which they evolved to thrive, is being lost.

Why is this happening?

- Weeds like gorse, broom, and lupins are invading braided rivers, forcing birds to nest on the remaining weed-free low-lying flood-prone areas.
- Weeds are also changing the character of braided rivers by choking the 'braids', forcing the water to flow into deeper, narrower channels, and forcing birds to breed in lower, flood-prone areas (see *What makes braided rivers special?*)
- Introduced pests—stoats, weasels, ferrets, rats, hedgehogs, and cats are devastating colonies.
- Taking water from rivers causes water levels to drop. The gravel islands become connected to riverbanks allowing predators easy access to nesting birds. Too little water also means not enough food for chicks.
- 4WDs, shooters, and dogs running free are taking a toll.
- Dams artificially control the water flow, destroying the natural 'braiding' process of braided rivers.

- From 1990-2012, in Canterbury alone an astonishing 11,630 ha of braided river margins/ floodplain, where birds once nested, was converted to intensive agriculture.

What does it matter if a few birds become extinct?

Every species plays an important role in its ecosystem: as a food source, a pollinator, a predator, and so on. When a species is lost, the ecosystem—and the free services it provides, like clean water—is affected, with unpredictable and sometimes disastrous consequences. And once a species vanishes, the effects cannot be undone.

It is well understood that without apex predators, healthy ecosystems soon deteriorate. In ecological terms, this is called a 'trophic cascade'. In New Zealand, birds evolved to become apex predators. Introduced predators like rats, cats, hedgehogs, ferrets and stoats, which are now devastating them, can't replace the vital role that birds play in braided river ecosystems. Conversely, protecting braided river birds and restoring their habitats plays a crucial role in restoring and maintaining healthy waterways.

Going...going...

...almost gone...

FOREVER

Black-billed gulls and black-fronted terns are found only in New Zealand where they breed in

BRAIDED RIVERS

But they are close to

EXTINCTION

You can help save them

Braided Rivers

Partnership Project

www.braid.org.nz/brpp

BRAID

Braided River Aid

www.braid.org.nz

Contact: manager@braid.org.nz

Black-billed gulls & black-fronted terns



Black-billed gull/tarāpuka
(*Chroicocephalus bulleri*)

Aren't all gulls the same?

No! Black-backed gulls are common, predatory and large: 60cm & weigh up to 1 kilogram.



Black-billed gulls are critically endangered, & small: 35-38cm & weigh around 230 grams.



- Eat small fish and invertebrates (bugs and worms) and sometimes lizards
- Build nests on clean shingle braided river beds, not in bushes or trees
- Nest in colonies in braided rivers from September until February
- Protected by law, they are also taonga (treasured) by Maori
- Are found only in New Zealand—nowhere else on Earth, if they vanish here, they're gone forever.

What makes braided rivers special?

Braided rivers differ to other rivers because they have many shallow channels or 'braids' flowing around islands of gravel. This provides a much larger area of shallow river margins where the food-chain starts: insects accumulate, small fish abound. This is where river birds love to feed. The islands and edges of braided rivers provide nesting grounds for these and other specialist braided river birds like wrybill, banded dotterels, black stilts, and pied stilts.

While braided rivers are relatively common in New Zealand, they are globally rare ecosystems. Canterbury is the world's 'hot-spot' with 60% of the country's braided river area, so we have a special responsibility to look after them.

Braided rivers are the only ecosystem in the 10 broadly targeted areas to have its own set of targets in the Canterbury Water Management Strategy. One target under 'Natural Character of Braided Rivers' is to implement actions to correct the decline in useable braided river bird habitat.

Ways everyone can help

1. Report colonies of nesting birds (September-February) to: manager@braid.org.nz
2. Send photos! Every phone has a digital camera!
3. Send follow-up reports during these months
4. We can design a trapping programme and supply traps to help you protect nesting colonies from predators

Farmers & Irrigators

Just as braided rivers are about shallow water meeting land, so too is irrigation. This is why braided river birds often frequent irrigated farm land. Hence, irrigation offers an opportunity to not only assist rare and endangered native birds, but also to enhance the environmental image of farmers. If you see black-fronted terns or black-billed gulls trying to nest on your land, welcome them, and let us know!



Black-fronted tern/tarapiroe
(*Sterna albobrostratus*)



Dozens of juvenile black-fronted terns (Photo: Linda Laing)



Black-billed gull adults and chicks (Photo: Steve Attwood)



Black-fronted tern chicks in nest (Photo: Steve Attwood)

Like to know more about the Braided River Partnership Project accreditation programme? Email: manager@braid.org.nz