

Wrybills Need a Lift For 'Bird of The Year'

Jacob Brookie

Council candidates aren't the only ones seeking your vote this month! It's Forest & Bird's annual 'Bird of The Year' contest and a Foxton visitor is being championed.

Of the 10,000 species of birds worldwide, only the ngutu parore (wrybill) has beak curved to one side, but it's more than just this fact that has local support behind the bird's candidacy.

Wildlife Foxton Trustee Dave Coles, a keen observer of the Manawatū Estuary, believes the wrybill should win this year.

"It's Foxton's winter equivalent of the godwits, but it's not that well known."

He says there are 30 wrybills at the estuary this year, and many more stop over in Foxton Beach on their flight up north at the end of each summer to Pukorokoro/Miranda and Manukau.

"The odd one stays here all year round."

The best place to see them is from the Dawick Street viewing platform at high tide but don't leave it too late. As the days get longer they fly to South Island rivers to breed.

In Foxton Beach wrybills feed together in flocks but when breeding and nesting, they fiercely defend up to 11 hectares of territory from wrybill rivals. Their grey plumage acts as excellent camouflage amongst the rocks but if their chicks are in danger from hungry swamp harriers/kāhu, the adult wrybill will pretend to have an injured wing, leading the predator away.

Gulls, terns, stilts and dotterels share the rivers with the wrybill, and each has to feed in a unique way so they don't compete for the same food. The wrybill's famous curved beak helps it find invertebrates hidden under rocks.

Wrybill are only found in New Zealand, and there are fewer than 5000 left. Intro-



That curved beak comes in handy, hooking out and eating invertebrates hidden under rocks. (Photo Credit: Dale Coles)

duced predators have taken their toll, and increasingly unpredictable floods wipe out riverside nests. The same camouflage which keeps wrybills safe from harriers also means that off-road drivers cannot see them.

Wrybills normally live to be 5-10 years old - but one bird lived for over twenty years, making it older than the Bird of the Year contest itself!

Despite this, the wrybill has yet to win - even an unexpected endorsement by then Leader of The Opposition Christopher

Luxon in 2022 failed to get it in the top ten.

But with the 'Join the Wryforce - Bird of the Year 2025' Facebook page emphasising its 'highly coordinated cuteness' making it 'covert in the rivers- tactical in the tides', the wrybill could be in with a chance.

"It is great to see it get all this attention" Coles says, "even if the edited photo of one in a flying helmet makes it look like it crashed and bent its beak!"

The Manawatū Estuary Management Team is urging people to vote for the wrybill through their newsletter, which gets



Dave Coles at the Estuary.

delivered to houses throughout Foxton Beach.

When the wrybills next land in Horowhenua, hopefully it will be as Bird of The Year. Winners don't receive a prize (like metal wrybills added to Foxton's godwit statues), but the world-wide media attention helps protect them by raising awareness.

For the ever-declining wrybills, that is a prize well worth winning.

i Voting opens 15 September and runs until 28 September at www.birdoftheyear.org.nz