

Big-Hearted Godwits Return From The North

Jacob Brookie

The godwits made an early return to Papangalo Te Wharangi Manawatu Estuary on Saturday after their 11,000km journey but some of the birds may have 'cheated' a little.

Every year the godwit makes the longest non-stop migration of any bird, travelling 11,000kms over eight to nine days flying from Alaska to New Zealand, and each year Manawatu Estuary Trust (MET) and members of the public welcome the godwits, gathering at Foxton Beach's Dawick Street viewing platform.

The first godwits arrived six weeks early this year and Massey University Associate Professor Dr. Phil Battley thinks he may have the answer.

"My suspicion is that they did not get to Alaska; they stayed in Asia after their first migration (in March)." He said they are likely young birds yet to breed.

Whether they took off from Alaska or the Korean Peninsula, godwits undergo a profound transformation as they prepare to migrate. "More than half their body weight becomes fat," said Battley, "their heart gets bigger, their blood thickens and their legs become stronger."

While a karakia was being held to welcome the birds home, a lone godwit flew in from the sea and tentatively landed on the mud flats.

Had it flown non-stop from Alaska? From Asia? Or had it just taken a connecting flight from Northland? Either way, it ended its long journey at the perfect time.

Horizons Regional Councillor Te Kenehi Teira, who helped lead the karakia, acknowledged the birds' amazing timing and hoped off-road vehicles stay well away from the bird sanctuary.

"You could travel half-way around the world and not see this," MET's Calvin Lane



Above: Godwit-welcomers used scopes set up by Manawatu Estuary Trust Volunteers. Below left: Dr Phil Battley demonstrating the scopes. Below right: The godwit which flew in during the welcome searching for some much-needed food.



said. "Where else can you get this close?"

Godwits will continue to arrive at the estuary throughout October. Up to 180 will land here before they return north in March.

