

# White-faced heron as prey of the New Zealand falcon

The white-faced heron (*Ardea novaehollandiae*), also commonly known as the blue heron is a slim, medium-sized, pale bluish-grey heron with a distinctive white head. Only occasionally reported from 1865 to 1930, the species is now widespread and common throughout New Zealand. The first confirmed breeding of this heron was at the Shag River, Otago in 1941.

The New Zealand falcon (*Falco novaeseelandiae*) is a fast-flying raptor that is endemic to New Zealand. Although distributed widely through North and South Islands, it is rare north of a line from Raglan to Tauranga and absent from Northland. It is now considered absent from Stewart Island but present on the Auckland Islands.

The white-faced heron has been recorded as a prey item of the New Zealand falcon and stated that "it is not uncommon for immature female falcons to take white-faced herons". However only three vaguely referenced records could be found, one of which was for an unsuccessful capture attempt.

During the 10 years (June 2006 to May 2016) of the New Zealand Falcon Survey, seven encounters between white-faced herons and New Zealand falcons were reported (Table 1). Three further encounters were found that occurred prior to the survey starting. In three instances (Table 1) video footage of encounters was provided.

## **Lowther Road Tophouse, St Arnaud**

On 25 June 2008, Ron Eddy observed two New Zealand falcons attacking a white-faced heron at his home. Ron describes this encounter as follows, "The larger female was flying close to the heron the whole time while the smaller, faster male was flying upwind and away from them then turning and coming in flat tack. When the male got close the heron was ready for it. Its head would be drawn back and as soon as the male got close the heron tried to use its beak like a spear. If it had connected that falcon would have been in big trouble. They carried on this battle, what looked like a Second World War aerial dog fight, around and over the house area for several minutes until the falcons suddenly broke away and the heron high tailed it out of there."

## **Ferintosh Station, Lake Pukaki**

During winter 2011 (no exact date was recorded) Gilbert Seymour discovered a New Zealand falcon with a dead white-faced heron on his station at Lake Pukaki. He described the encounter to Donna Falconer from Twizel as "he was alerted to the sound of a falcon giving something a hammering. After a while he went to investigate because the sounds were highly unusual. He found the

resident falcon on the neck of a now dead white-faced heron. He assumed from the placement of the falcon and heron that the falcon had actually finished off the heron through drowning it, by standing on its neck and keeping it submerged in the wet springy area the birds were found in. The falcon completely consumed the heron over a few days."

### **Carew Peel Forest School, Carew**

In his own words Bruce Ward describes his observation from 10 July 2011. "Yes, one Sunday about 1.30 pm when we went into school three of us were chatting and all of a sudden there was a great flurry of wings and squawks a few metres above our heads. A falcon was attacking a white-faced heron that often used to nest at school. The heron banked abruptly along a row of conifers and sought shelter in the trees and in its survival panic scared two nesting magpies out which distracted the Falcon but much to the demise of one of the magpies which was attacked on the wing and was killed. The whole incident took less than one minute but was incredibly spectacular."

### **Nokomai Gorge, Mataura River**

On 28 April 2011, Rick Gerrard witnessed a New Zealand falcon attacking white-faced heron. He recounts his observation, some of which he managed to video, as follows. "The footage was recorded in the Nokomai Gorge on the Mataura River here in Southland whilst fishing. I watched as a falcon and a heron had quite a scrap mid-air over the river, obviously the falcon was getting the better of the heron, swooping in and repeatedly knocking the heron mid-air. This went on for a short time until the heron tired and landed mid river for a breather. The falcon landed on the opposite bank, I thought to do the same, and that would be the end of it. However the falcon then darted straight across the water smacking into the heron effectively rolling it over whilst in the river, it must have been a substantial smack as the heron didn't seem to put up much of a fight - (after this I started recording, better late than never...). Anyway the interesting part, (other than everything prior I missed getting on film), is what the falcon does after collecting his thoughts sitting on top of the heron, practically swimming with a much larger bird to the side of the river."

### **Glenburn Motor Camp, Lake Benmore**

This observation was contained in a larger database of New Zealand falcon records provided by Dean Nelson, Department of Conservation, Twizel. Comments contained in this database for this record stated, "Attacking a white-faced heron over a period of time until both flew out of sight".

### **Worsley Hut, Lake Te Anau**

Kim Dawick, together with hunting friends, were staying at Worsley Hut on the shores of Lake Te Anau when they befriended a juvenile New Zealand

falcon. Video footage was captured of these encounters, including the falcon taking food on the wing when thrown. Also recorded was the young falcon dragging a dead white-faced heron underneath a log.

### **Upper Kawhatau, Mangaweka**

On 23 April 2016, George and Denis McNie watched and filmed a juvenile female New Zealand falcon chase and kill a white-faced heron. There was also a second falcon present, believed to be a sibling male. Two days later these two falcons again killed a white-faced heron.

### **Video footage**

As mentioned during three of these encounters video footage was taken and has been generously shared. The footage can be viewed at:  
<http://www.nzfalcon.org.nz/nz-falcon/resources-on-nz-falcon/film-footage>

On closer examination of the 10 recorded encounters between white-faced herons and New Zealand falcons reveals some interesting details. Nine of the encounters occurred in the South Island, in eight, only a single New Zealand falcon was involved and seven were known to be successful for the falcons. Six of these events happened in the last five years, five occurred during April, and four were observed by fishermen at a river. Three of the encounters were from the same river, the Mataura River in Southland, two reports were when two New Zealand falcons were involved, whilst one was for two successful encounters only two days apart.

Why New Zealand falcon would target such a large and potentially dangerous prey item is unknown. But as previously referred to "it is not uncommon for immature female falcons to take white-faced herons" and possibly do so because of foraging inexperience and because males are too small to do so. This would tend to be born out as three of the successful encounters were known to be by female juvenile falcons. Also the majority of observations were recorded in autumn/winter (April-June), when juvenile falcons may have been desperate for food having recently become independent and so learning to forage for themselves.

### **Acknowledgements**

Grateful acknowledgement and many thanks to those that shared their observations of the encounters between New Zealand falcons and white-faced herons, Ron Eddy, Gilbert Seymour, Bruce Ward, Rick Gerrard, Terry Coburn, Kim Dawick, and George and Denise McNie. Many thanks to Ian Cole for his 'pre-NZ Falcon Survey' encounter and details on the other two recounted encounters by Dick Marquand and Dave Witherow. Much appreciation to Carol Sawyer, Donna Falconer, Bruce Ward, Dean Nelson and the late Catherine Sintenie for valuable assistance in tracking down details on five of the encounters.

**Table 1.** Summary of NZ falcons observed preying on White-faced Herons. The first three (above dividing line) were for before the NZ Falcon Survey commenced on 1 June 2006.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Observer</b>	<b>Number of NZ falcon</b>	<b>Juvenile NZ Falcon</b>	<b>Successful</b>
1996	Diamond Creek Glenorchy	Dick Marquand	1	Unknown	Yes
Feb 2002	Cattle Flat Mataura River	Ian Cole	1	Unknown	Yes
2005	Cattle Flat Mataura River	Dave Witherow	1	Unknown	Yes
25 Jun 08	Lowther Road Tophouse St Arnaud	Ron Eddy	2	Unknown	No
Winter 2011	Ferintosh Station Lake Pukaki	Gilbert Seymour	1	Unknown	Yes
10 Jul 11	Carew Peel Forest School Carew	Bruce Ward	1	Unknown	No
28 Apr 12	Nokomai Gorge Mataura River	Rick Gerrard	1	Unknown	Yes
2 Apr 13	Glenburn Motor Camp Lake Benmore	Terry Coburn	1	Unknown	Unknown
10 Apr 14	Worsley Hut Lake Te Anau	Kim Dawick	1	Yes	Yes
23 & 25 Apr 16	Upper Kawhatau Mangaweka	George and Denis McNie	2	Yes - both	Yes - both