



Title: “Baby B-dots”

Description: Banded dotterel chicks at Kākā Point

Photographer’s name: Noelle Bennett

Where and when: Kākā Point, The Catlins. November 2017.

Sustainability: For anybody who hasn’t been, Kākā Point is the most wonderful beach with stunning stretches of golden sand scattered with rather splendid rocky outcrops. But just before arriving at Kākā Point itself on the Balclutha side is a bay called Molyneux Bay. This bay stretches from the mouth of the Koau Branch of the Clutha River to the small rocky outcrop at the northern end of Kākā Point beach. And at the back of the bay is a stretch of shingle leading to a relatively large rush and sedge swamp area. It’s an ecological gem and is a regionally significant wetland for waterfowl. Here you’ll find grey teal and shovellers, pied stilts and bitterns, marsh crakes and spotted crakes and if you’re lucky you might even spot a fernbird or two. But for us, the winner hands-down is the banded dotterel.

Known affectionately as the B dot, they are the most common small plover of New Zealand’s seashores, riverbeds and estuaries. Having said that, their conservation status is defined as “nationally vulnerable”. The total population is in the region of 50,000 birds and is declining. Banded dotterels have disappeared from many sites throughout New Zealand, including some where the habitat has changed little in recent decades. It would seem that one of the key factors in the decline is likely to be introduced mammalian predators which prey on most of the eggs that are laid. Any of the chicks that manage to hatch, as well as juveniles and adults, also fall prey to those same predators. These include feral cats, mustelids (ferrets, stoats and weasels), rats and hedgehogs.

Habitat loss and human activities have also contributed to displacement of these birds at some sites, particularly breeding sites and just spending a little bit of time at a place like Molyneux Bay makes it easy to see why that is the case. An adult bird is about 20cms long and weighs in at about 60g. They are seriously small. They lay their eggs in shallow scrapes in gravel, sand or soil and often the first sign that they are around is when they suddenly race off in front of you making their rather unobtrusive ‘chip’ call. This behaviour indicates that there is a nest or hatchlings close by. But if you don’t know where the nest is, there is a huge risk you could stand on it, destroying those precious eggs. Many of the beaches where they nest have motor cycles and utes driving along them. I shudder to think how many nests and chicks are lost simply because the drivers of those vehicles are totally unaware that these tiny creatures are around.

Because we have been to Kākā Point and Molyneux Bay on many occasions, we know to tread carefully and keep our eyes open. Shortly after we arrived and started walking along the shingle, a wee B-dot raced off in front of us. We

couldn't immediately see anything so we dropped to the ground where we were. We do this to see if the bird will come back so we can get some idea where the next is and therefore avoid it. Soon enough she decided it was safe for her to return and she settled back on her nest - a nest that even when we knew where it was, if you took your eyes off it for a moment, you'd struggle to relocate. We waited for a few moments and then carefully walked off away from her. Not too far along from there we came across two more B-dots. They both ran in different directions, making their strange and gentle 'chip' call. This behaviour made us think they had chicks, so again we dropped to the ground whilst we tried to see where they were. That way we could hopefully not cause any damage. After a little while two baby B-dots appeared. They seemed unperturbed and the parents had calmed down, so with my lens at almost full reach, I grabbed a few images before carefully getting back to my feet and continuing our walk. Absolutely epic.

This example illustrates a need for ethical photography. We can do a lot of good by focussing our lens on conservation threats and opportunities, but the "do no harm" principle must operate all the time if the photographers themselves are to maintain trust of their viewers.

Photo specs: This image is presented as a triptych to help the viewer appreciate these gorgeous little birds. Technical specs: The image was taken using a Panasonic DMC-GH4 camera and a Panasonic Leica DG 100-400mm f/4-6.3 ASPH lens. Exposure details - 1/640 sec at f6.3 with an ISO of 100 and a focal length of 350mm (700mm full frame equivalent).

Digital specs: 12,683 x 7373 pixels (93.51MP) @ 300dpi

Key words: birds, dotterel, banded dotterel, b-dot, chick, Kākā Point, predation, habitat loss,, triptych, Noelle Bennett, Ecosystems Photography, sustainability.

Price: \$300 (incl. GST) for use of the digital image. Visit www.ecosystemsp photography/sales for details & to order, or to get a quote if you would like a high-quality print.

Donation: The price includes a \$100 donation to a sustainability organisation or project of your choice, or otherwise to WWF-NZ <https://www.wwf.org.nz/>

We recommend that the donation goes to WWF-NZ because they apply evidence-based environmental advocacy and support education and community-led action, including protection of the coastal areas where these B-dots occur. WWF-NZ push for climate-change mitigation, one of the long-term threats to the dotterel breeding areas.

Image ref: NB#027 (please use this reference in all orders and correspondence).

Noelle Bennett

7 December 2021