



**Title:** Ready for take-off

**Description:** Kuaka, Eastern Bar-tailed Godwit

**Photographer:** Rod Hay

**Where, when:** Waipu River Mouth Wildlife Refuge, Northland, January 2014

**Sustainability?** The Kuaka or Eastern Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica baueri*) is a very significant bird for Aotearoa New Zealand, ecologically and culturally. Breeding in the high Arctic in Western Alaska, they then migrate non-stop down through the Pacific, taking a little over a week for the 12,000 km journey. That's an average flight speed of around 55 km/hr!

Around 75,000 of the total population of around 128,000 spend our summer feeding on intertidal mudflats of NZ harbours and estuaries, the remainder spending that time in Eastern Australia. The largest populations here can be seen in harbours such as Parengarenga in Northland, the Kaipara and Manukau Harbours, Firth of Thames and Farewell Spit, with smaller numbers elsewhere right around the country.

They were once hunted for food in NZ (if such easy pickings could be called hunting) but have been protected since the 1940s, with the populations recovering somewhat until a steady decline started over the last couple of decades. This is largely due to loss of coastal habitat outside Aotearoa NZ. Although kuaka fly south directly, their

northern migration takes them via refuelling stops around the margins of the Yellow Sea, where large-scale "reclamation" for prawn farms and other development has resulted in significant loss of staging habitat, particularly in China but also in North and South Korea.

Representatives of the Pukorokoro Miranda Naturalists Trust and the NZ Department of Conservation have worked hard with equivalents in China and North Korea to encourage protection of remaining important sites for kuaka and other migratory shorebirds. Migratory birds like the kuaka are the clearest examples of ecological connectivity between separate nations and the need for political collaboration to match the ecological scales for species survival – if ecological degradation weakens one link in an international chain, the whole population and multiple ecosystems can be impacted.

Each spring, the cathedral bells in Nelson and Christchurch peal in celebration of the first kuaka arrivals in the Motueka and Ihutai Heathcote-Avon Estuaries after their remarkable journey from Alaska. It's great to see communities publicly rejoice the recurrence of significant ecosystem rhythms – it helps make us all more aware of nature.

**Photo notes:** Kuaka are easily disturbed while feeding or roosting, so it is important to maintain a distance and low profile when photographing them.

I took this photo with my Olympus OM-D E-M5 M4/3 camera by stalking the bird as it came in from feeding at high-tide, but it raised its wings as I got a little too close so I had to carefully and muddily back away to let it settle. Exposure: 1/1000s, 300mm, f10, ISO 400.

**Digital specs:** 2895 x 2486 pixels (7 MP)

**Key words:** Bird, Kuaka, Eastern Bar-tailed Godwit, *Limosa lapponica*, Waipu River, Northland, Biodiversity, Rod Hay, Ecosystems Photography, Sustainability

**Price:** \$150 (incl. GST) for use of the digital image

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Please donate to the *Pukorokoro Miranda Naturalists Trust* to help their work to support kuaka and a wide range of other shorebirds. They educate, run citizen science programmes to survey birds, plant to enhance habitats – and support bird photographers that come to Miranda from all around the world.

**Image Ref:** RH#006 (Please refer to this reference in orders and correspondence)

**Rod Hay**

6 December 2021