



The  
**Ornithological Society**

of New Zealand (Inc.)

Otago Branch

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**The George Chance Memorial Census of Great Crested Grebes  
in Central Otago, February 2009**

Great Crested Grebes (*Podiceps cristatus australis*) are classified as ‘vulnerable’ by IUCN and ‘nationally critical’ in NZ. The Otago Branch of OSNZ Inc. successfully carried out a census of Great Crested Grebes in Central Otago in memory of George Chance on 21 and 22 February, 2009. Shortly before his death in 2008, George suggested another census of the Great Crested Grebes should be carried to get a new accurate count because there had been many anecdotal reports of increasing numbers of birds on the Central Otago lakes.

Planning started in early 2008 and contact was made with various people and organisations to cover the Central Otago lakes by shore and boat. The weather on the census weekend meant that the use of all motorboats had to be cancelled, but this didn’t stop the car-based crews going ahead. Lake Dunstan was covered by two teams, one on each side of the lake and access was possible to most of the shoreline, with calm conditions. Lake Hayes was covered by canoe. Walking teams covered lakes Dispute and Johnson. Without water transport Mt Nicholas Lagoon was not covered, and lakes Hawea, Wanaka and Wakatipu only partially.

RESULTS

Lake	2009 Adults	2009 Juveniles	2009 Total	2004 Total <sup>4</sup>
<b>OTAGO</b>				
Butchers Dam	0	0	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>
Hawea <sup>1</sup>	3	0	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>
Wanaka <sup>1</sup>	12	6	<b>18</b>	<b>4</b>
Wakatipu(Frankton/Q'town) <sup>1</sup>	5	4	<b>9</b>	<b>4</b>
Wakatipu (Kingston) <sup>1</sup>	2	0	<b>2</b>	<b>nc</b>
Mt Nicholas Lagoon	nc	nc	<b>nc</b>	<b>11</b>
Dunstan	52	38	<b>90</b>	<b>16</b>
Dispute	0	0	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
Moke	3	2	<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>
Kirkpatrick	0	0	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
Johnson	9	2	<b>11</b>	<b>6</b>
Hayes <sup>2</sup>	66	15	<b>81</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>Otago Totals</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>219</b>	<b>117</b>
<b>WAITAKI</b>				
Benmore	46	6	<b>52</b>	<b>22</b>
Aviemore	12	12	<b>24</b>	<b>5</b>
Waitaki <sup>3</sup>	7	2	<b>9</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Waitaki Totals</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>27</b>

<sup>1</sup> partially covered. <sup>2</sup> 30 ‘adults’ not unambiguously assigned adult/juvenile status. <sup>3</sup> 5 ‘adults’ not unambiguously assigned adult/juvenile status. <sup>4</sup> data are from Jensen & Snoyink 2005.  
nc not covered.

The most exciting finding is that the number of Great Crested Grebes on the Otago Lakes has nearly doubled in the five years since the last count (Jensen & Snoyink, 2005 *Notornis* 53: 35-42), from 117 to 214 now. And this is likely to be an under-estimate due to the inclement weather, the partial coverage of some lakes and the non-coverage of Mt Nicholas Lagoon.

The greatest success story was for Lake Dunstan, where there are over 5 times more birds, with an increase from just 16 in 2004 to 90. Breeding pairs and juveniles were seen around the whole lake and for the first time 7 adults and 5 juveniles were spotted on the lake arm between Clyde Dam and Cromwell township, an area where they have never been seen before. The greatest concentration of Great Crested Grebes was at the head of the lake where the Clutha enters through a braided wetland and much willow cover. The high ratio of juveniles to adults suggests that the birds are breeding very successfully on Lake Dunstan.

Lake Hayes has maintained its high numbers, including many breeding pairs (81), but did not show any great change from 2004 numbers (75), which may indicate that the population on this small lake is now nearing a maximum. The ratio of juveniles to adults also indicated that their breeding here is successful.

Breeding pairs at Queenstown have been present for several years, and were seen again on the census and also in Frankton Arm. There is concern about jetboats and water-sports as two dead birds have been reported this season after jet skiers appeared to chase them.

Another success story was the trebling of numbers on the Waitaki hydro-lakes from 27 in 2004 to 85, with a doubling of the numbers on Benmore, the first sightings of breeding pairs on Aviemore and the first report of birds on Waitaki. The number of juveniles was four times the 2004 figure.

In summary, this census revealed that there is a doubling in numbers of Great Crested Grebes in Otago and a trebling of numbers on the Waitaki lakes. The number of juveniles indicates that it was a very good breeding season, with juveniles present on all Otago and Waitaki lakes where grebes were present. The easy accessibility of Lakes Dunstan and Hayes means that many more people will be able to experience the pleasure of watching these beautiful birds and this should raise public support for the need to preserve suitable habitats. The hydro-lakes appear to have contributed to the expansion of Australasian crested grebes so it will be important to identify what features make them favourable habitats for breeding and to develop strategies to manage the lakes when recreational use increases.

Compiled by Mary Thompson (Regional Representative, Otago OSNZ Inc.)  
and Peter Schweigman (Otago OSNZ Inc.)

#### Participants

Otago: Alan Baker, Neil Clayton, Louise Foord, Lala Frazer, Sue Galloway, Florence Gaud, Lesley Gowans, Verity Harrison, Jocelyn McLean, Dawn Palmer, Karen Riener, Peter Schweigman, Susan Schweigman, Mary Thompson, Dave York, Janet York.  
Canterbury: Nick Allen, Rosalie Snoyink.