

A large diverse group of birds of estuaries, coasts, riverbeds and farmland. Most are long-legged and feed in or near shallow water. Bill shape is varied; short and stubby in those (e.g. dotterels) that peck from the surface, but longer in those that feed in shallow water (e.g. stilts), or probe deeply (e.g. godwits). Flight strong and direct. Often form flocks while roosting or flying, but disperse to feed. Many species seen in NZ breed in the Arctic and arrive in September, with remnants of breeding plumage, and depart in March, often in breeding plumage. Most subadults and a few adults spend the southern winter here.

PIED OYSTERCATCHER (*Torea*) *Haematopus ostralegus*

Abundant native

46 cm, 550 g. Striking black and white wader with long stout red bill and short stubby pink legs. Sharp border on lower chest between black upperparts and white underparts, a white tab extends upwards in front of folded wing. In flight, white wingbar, rump and lower back. Orange eye-ring. Sexes alike. Immature has browner plumage, dusky-red bill and dull legs. Forms large roosting and feeding flocks. Flight call a loud shrill 'kleep'. **Habitat:** Breeds inland on riverbeds and farmland, mainly in South I. Migrates to estuaries for autumn and winter. **Breeding:** Aug–Jan. [Sp 168]



OYSTERCATCHERS

Haematopodidae

7 species worldwide; 3 breed in New Zealand, including 2 endemic species.

Oystercatchers are gregarious, feeding in loose flocks but generally roosting and flying in tight flocks. They are mainly coastal, although Pied Oystercatchers are unusual in that they breed well inland on gravel riverbeds and on farmland. In winter, all species sometimes roost or feed inland on short grass or beside shallow lakes. Their nest is a simple scrape, partially lined with small twigs. Both sexes share incubation and feed the precocial young.

Oystercatchers are all black, or black and white, shorebirds with a very long, straight, reddish-orange bill, a squat body and short, thick, pinkish-red legs. They have loud, shrill calls and elaborate 'piping' displays, in which several birds gather and move around with neck stretched, bill pointed downwards and body hunched with wings touching the ground, accompanied by loud, insistent calling.

Reading: Baker, A.J. 1973. *Notornis* 20: 128–144.

168. PIED OYSTERCATCHER

***Haematopus ostralegus* Plate 38**

Other names: *Torea*, South Island Pied Oystercatcher, SIPO

Size: 46 cm, 550 g

Geographical variation: The New Zealand subspecies of the widely distributed Pied Oystercatcher is *finnschi*; some authors treat it as a separate species.

Distribution: Almost worldwide, mainly near the coasts of the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia and Australasia. In New Zealand, they breed inland in the South Island, mainly east of the Southern Alps, on braided riverbeds, farmland, fringes of lakes and in subalpine bogs. Since 1980, a few pairs have bred on the Ngaruroro River, Hawke's Bay, and since 1988 a few have bred near Lake Onoke, Wairarapa. After breeding, some shift to estuaries of the South Island, but in late December to early March most migrate directly to estuaries and sandy beaches of the North Island and the northern South Island, although many also remain through the winter at estuaries of the South and Stewart Islands. Stragglers have reached Australia, Vanuatu and the Kermadec, Chatham and Campbell Islands.

Dunedin and at Southland harbours. Birds start returning to their South Island breeding grounds from early June, but most breeding birds return in late July to early August. In spring and summer, about 15,000 (18% of the total population), mainly subadult birds, stay at the main wintering sites, especially in the Manukau–Firth of Thames area (7000) and the Nelson region (3000).

Population: c. 85,000 birds: North Island 60,000 (Kaipara Harbour 14,000, Manukau Harbour 26,000 and Firth of Thames 12,000); South Island 25,000 (mainly Nelson to Farewell Spit 16,000); Stewart Island 300.

Conservation: Protected abundant native. From the mid-1800s, the population was in serious decline from hunting; however, with conversion of tussockland to pasture, and their protection in 1940, they have increased rapidly. This is especially obvious at the northern North Island wintering sites of Manukau Harbour and the Firth of Thames, where numbers have increased from fewer than 1000 in the 1940s to 17,000 in 1972 and to 38,000 in the 1990s. At southern wintering sites, they have also increased, but not to the same extent. The total population has increased by about 75% from the 49,000 birds estimated in 1970–71.

The largest wintering populations (10,000+ birds) are at Kaipara and Manukau Harbours, the Firth of Thames, and the coast between Nelson and Farewell Spit. 1000+ birds are regularly at Whangarei and Kawhia Harbours, the Avon–Heathcote Estuary, near

Breeding: Pairs usually reclaim the same territory year after year, even though the birds generally overwinter at different sites. The

nest is a shallow scrape; on riverbeds it is usually on a slightly raised area of sand, often near a piece of driftwood or a prominent stone, but on farmland it is often placed randomly, although away from fences or trees. Eggs are laid in August–December, mostly September–November; earlier in lowlands. They lay 1–2–3 brownish-stone eggs (56 x 39 mm; 44 g), blotched dark brown. Eggs are laid 2 days apart, mainly in the afternoon. Both sexes incubate for 25–28–30 days, starting when the penultimate egg is laid. The downy chicks remain in the nest 1–2 days and then stay in the parents' territory until they first fly at c. 5 weeks old. Young return to their natal area at 3–4 years old but generally do not start breeding until 4–5 years old. The oldest bird recorded in New Zealand lived over 27 years.

bivalves), estuarine worms, earthworms and insect larvae (especially grass grub), but other small invertebrates and small fish are taken. They feed in estuaries, on sandy shores, in pasture, on ploughed paddocks and riverbeds by surface picking and deep probing. They open bivalves by stabbing between the shells and twisting the bill to part the shells, but some birds hammer through the shell.

In the hand: Females are larger than males, especially for bill length, but measurements overlap slightly: males 81 mm, females 91 mm. First-year birds are distinguished by their dull brown-black upperparts, brownish-orange bill, grey legs and brown eyes, and they retain juvenile primaries through their first year. Second- and third-year birds still have a brownish tinge to their back but develop the pink legs and orange-red eyes of adults.

Behaviour: Much behaviour is highly ritualised, and many displays are common to other oystercatchers. The most conspicuous breeding display is 'social piping'. Birds mob aerial predators and lead ground predators away from nest or chicks with conspicuous walking, false brooding and feigning wing injury.

Reading: Baker, A.J. 1973. *Notornis* 20: 128–144. Baker, A.J. 1974. *Notornis* 21: 219–233. Baker, A.J. 1974. *NZ J Mar Fresh Res* 8: 211–219. Baker, A.J. 1975. *J Zool (Lond)* 175: 357–390. Baker, A.J. 1975. *Notornis* 22: 189–194. Sagar, P.M. et al. 2000. *Notornis* 47: 71–81. Sibson, R.B. 1966. *Notornis* 13: 94–97. Twydale, M. & Twydale, W. 1983. *Notornis* 30: 197–198. Veitch, C.R. 1978. *Notornis* 25: 1–24.

Feeding: Diet is mainly molluscs (especially

