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Birds of New Zealand - Locality Guide. 3rd edn.

Arun Books, Orewa, New Zealand.

Variable oystercatcher: pp 146-147.



VARIABLE OYSTERCATCHER.

Family Haematopodidae

Species *Haematopus unicolor*

Common names Variable Oystercatcher, Black Oystercatcher (South Island).

Status Endemic

Abundance Common

Size 480 mm (cf sparrow 145 mm, Pied Oystercatcher 460 mm)

Habitat A bird of coastal areas only, which inhabits sandy beaches, mudflats and rocky promontories.

New Zealand range Found around Northland, the Bay of Plenty and down the east coast to Wellington and up to Wanganui, but with a gap around the Taranaki coast. Around the South Island, gaps are found along the coasts of Canterbury and South Westland.

Discussion Considered a close relative of the Australian Sooty Oystercatcher (*H. fuliginosus*) but it differs from the Australian bird in that it is polymorphic

as to colouration, coming in three colour phases – black all over; with whitish breast markings; or distinctly pied not unlike the Pied Oystercatcher. Variable Oystercatchers of Southland and Stewart Island are usually all black.

Description – pied phase (above)

Upperparts Black. **Underparts** White of various quantities. **Bill, legs and eyes** Red.

Description – all black phase (below)

Upperparts and underparts Black. **Bill, legs and eyes** Red.

Conspicuous features

- Appears heavier than Pied Oystercatcher.
- Red bill, legs and eyes.

Call A noisy bird with a call similar to the Pied Oystercatcher – a melodic but quite aggressive, “keeleep keeleep”.

Nest A scrape on a sandy beach or rock shelf. Up to 3 brown, blotched dark-brown eggs are laid.

From P. 145

Feature differences between the Pied Oystercatcher (*H. ostralegus*) and the pied form of the Variable Oystercatcher (*H. unicolor*)

- The Pied Oystercatcher has a clean cut line between the white underparts and the black upperparts – lacking on the Variable.
- The Pied Oystercatcher has two clean cut white shoulder tabs which reach up into the black upperparts – lacking on the Variable.
- The Pied Oystercatcher appears a neater and smaller bird.
- The Pied Oystercatcher has a slimmer bill.

Characteristic differences between Pied Oystercatcher and the pied form of the Variable Oystercatchers

- The Pied Oystercatcher is an inland nester and does not nest along the coast. The Variable nests along the coast.
- The Pied Oystercatcher has a different starting time for its nesting season, laying its eggs in August, while the Variable starts nesting in mid-October with a second brood in December or early January.
- The Pied Oystercatcher migrates north from the breeding grounds. The Variable tends to form up into small coastal flocks not far from breeding areas. Some remain resident on their breeding territories from one year to the next.

Similar characteristics of each species

- Both birds have similar, “keeleep keeleep” type calls.
- Both species defend nesting territories with broken wing type displays.
- Both species feed their young until the fledgling stage, being the only

- wader to actually feed its chicks.
- Both species have similar pale, buffish-brown eggs, marked with black dots and splotches. Clutch size in both species is usually three eggs for the first brood and two eggs for the second or replacement broods.

Where to find – North Island

Northland – Most beaches have breeding pairs with territories at approximately 200 metres between nests.

North Auckland – Orewa estuary. P. 292.

North Auckland – Weiti (Wade) River near the Wade wharf. P. 294.

South Auckland – Clevedon to Miranda. P. 302.

Wellington – Waikanae Estuary. P. 339.

Where to find – South Island

Canterbury – Generally missing from the Canterbury coastline but often seen on the Timaru coastline.

Otago Peninsula – On beaches here and opposite at Aramoana. P. 359, 360.

South Island – Common away from Canterbury and the lower west coast.

Where to find – Stewart Island

Ulva Island on most of its small bays. P. 367.

