

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 STILT (Poaka) *Himantopus himantopus*

Common native

35 cm, 190 g. Distinctive black and white wader with extremely long pinkish-red legs and long fine black bill. Variable black on crown, nape, hindneck and collar on the lower neck; black wings and back; grey wash at end of tail. Face, throat and underparts white. Eye red. Juvenile has grey wash on head and neck, dull pink legs, dark brown back and wings. Distinctive yapping calls, often heard at night or when breeding birds are disturbed. Hybridises naturally with Black Stilt; intermediate forms not uncommon. **Habitat:** Breeds on riverbeds, lake margins and damp pasture. Form flocks at estuaries and lakes outside breeding season. Many South I and southern North I birds migrate to northern North I after breeding season. **Breeding:** Jul–Jan.

[Sp 171]



STILTS and AVOCETS

Recurvirostridae

Of 7 species, 2 breed in New Zealand and a third may have bred in the nineteenth century.

females, with complex lamellae which they use to sift out tiny food particles. Sexes are alike, but males have longer legs. Most species have a pattern of black above and white below. Webbing between the front three toes is much reduced in stilts. Although having long legs, which trail behind the short, square tail in flight, they are slim and graceful. Adult plumage is gained in their first or second year; they first breed at 2–3 years.

These are medium-sized waders with long, slender bills, necks and especially legs, which suit their wading up to the belly to feed in shallow fresh, salt or brackish water. Stilts have a fine, almost straight bill. Avocets have a fine, upturned bill, more sharply turned in

171. PIED STILT *Himantopus himantopus*

Plate 39

Other names: Poaka, Black-winged/White-headed Stilt

Size: 35 cm, 190 g

Geographical variation: Of the five subspecies, *leucocephalus* extends from the Philippines, Indonesia and the Bismarck Archipelago to Australia and New Zealand.

Distribution: Pied Stilts, more generally known as Black-winged Stilts overseas, breed right around the world in tropical and warm temperate regions. They breed prolifically throughout New Zealand but are rare on Stewart and Chatham Islands and absent from Fiordland and the subantarctic islands. They may have colonised New Zealand as recently as the early 1800s. They expanded rapidly from about the 1870s to the early 1900s, and continued to increase at least until the 1940s.

The migration routes taken by the various regional populations of Pied Stilts have been studied by the Ornithological Society of New Zealand by a national programme of colour-banding adults and juveniles. Birds on riverbeds in the southern North Island and the South Island move in December–February to coastal places and some, especially those from inland Southland, Central Otago, Mackenzie Basin and Mid-Canterbury, move to northern North Island harbours. Coastal breeders in both main islands and birds breeding in the north are usually sedentary. Pied Stilts can be heard calling as they fly high overhead on migration.

Population: c. 30,000 birds in 1984–93. Maximum autumn–winter counts are: Parenga-

renga 1500, Rangaunu 3000, Kaipara 3000+, Firth of Thames 5000, Tauranga 1500, Whakaki Lagoon 1000, Lake Poukawa 1500, Lake Wairarapa 1500, Lake Ellesmere 3000, Lake Wainono 1000. Favoured also, but accommodating hundreds not thousands, are Houhora, Whangarei, Kawhia/Aotea, Maketu, Ahuriri, Lake Hatuma and Manawatu Estuary in the North Island, and Nelson Haven, Lake Grassmere, Avon–Heathcote Estuary, Green Island Lagoon and Southland lagoons and estuaries in the South Island. Smaller flocks are at many places around the New Zealand coast. They are least common where the habitat is unsuitable, e.g. in Taranaki and the West Coast.

Conservation: Protected common native. Pied Stilts are probably a relatively recent colonist of New Zealand and have thrived with the conversion of lowland swamp forest into seasonally wet farmland. In South Canterbury, Pied Stilts have hybridised with the endemic Black Stilt when its numbers have dwindled to such a level that Black Stilts have difficulty finding a mate of their own species.

Breeding: Pied Stilts return to their breeding grounds in June–July in lowland places and August–October in inland places. They breed in loose colonies of up to 100 pairs, but typically 3–20 pairs, on mounds surrounded by or near water in wetlands in open country, both coastal and inland. Mainly in flooded pasture, muddy pasture resulting from chewed-down, trampled turnips and choumoellier, margins of swamps, edges of ponds

and estuaries and other permanent wetlands, and gravel riverbeds. Both sexes build the nest. In lowland places, the peak of laying is in August–October; October–November inland. They lay 2–4–5 greenish eggs (44 x 32 mm) with blackish-brown blotches and streaks. Starting with the last egg, both sexes incubate for about 25 days. The fledging period is 30–37 days. Pied Stilts usually start breeding at 2 years old, occasionally at 1 year old. The oldest banded bird of the European subspecies lived over 12 years.

Behaviour: Gregarious at all seasons; adults breed together in loose colonies, feed together and, in autumn and winter, roost together in often large compact flocks. Their yapping is persistent and noisy when feeding and flying, including at night; juveniles utter a higher-pitched chipping, sometimes hoarse, until their first winter.

Feeding: Diet is mainly aquatic and terrestrial invertebrates. If the habitat is tidal, they feed at low tide, day or night. At inland ponds and swamps, they take mainly insects; on inland riverbeds mainly larvae of mayflies, caddisflies, stoneflies and midges, plus adult waterboatmen and molluscs. Common methods of feeding are plunging, in which birds peck underwater; snatching, in which birds capture flying insects; probing, in which birds insert their bill into mud or wet soil; and scything, in which birds sweep the bill from side to side in soft mud, like avocets, particularly when wind or darkness makes prey less visible.

Reading: Pierce, R.J. 1984. *Notornis* 31: 7–18. Pierce, R.J. 1984. *Notornis* 31: 106–130. Pierce, R.J. 1985. *NZ J Zool* 12: 467–472. Pierce, R.J. 1986. *Auk* 103: 273–280.