Shags are medium to large aquatic birds. Most are all black, or black above and white below. Bill long, strongly hooked at the tip. Upright posture when perched. Short legs; feet are fully webbed. Many have brightly coloured facial skin when breeding. Swans alike. In flight, wings short and broad, and neck is extended. Swims with head held uplit and body low in the water.

**King Shag**
*Leucocarbo minor*

- **Habitat:** Coastal waters of Marlborough Sounds.
- **Breeding:** May–Nov.

**Riot Island Shag**

**Spotted Shag**
*Leucocarbo phaeoleucus*

- **Habitat:** Offshore islands in the Marlborough Sounds.

**B Nz Shag**
*Leucocarbo phoebe*

- **Habitat:** Coastal waters of Marlborough Sounds.

**Campaell Island Shag**

**Stewart Island Shag**

**Riot Island Shag**

**Chatham Island Shag**

**Phalacrocoracidae**

33 species worldwide in freshwater and marine habitats; 12 species breed in the New Zealand region, including 8 endemic species.

In New Zealand, all members of the Phalacrocoracidae are called shags, whereas elsewhere the term ‘cormorant’ is used for members of the genus Phalacrocorax. Foot colour varies between the three genera in New Zealand: black in the mainly freshwater Phalacrocorax, pink in the marine Leucocarbo, and yellow in the marine Chionorhyncus.

Shags are medium to large, long-necked aquatic birds with a stiff, wedge-shaped tail, and moderately short, rounded wings, which black-footed shags hold out to dry when perched. They feed by diving from the water surface to catch fish and crustaceans with their long hooked bill. They use their webbed feet to swim underwater. The outermost toe is longest, and a web connects the inner toe with the long hind toe. In the breeding season, bare skin on the face becomes brightly coloured and contrasts with the eye and bill. Shags sometimes feed in flocks, but they typically roost in flocks and breed in colonies on cliffs or rocky islands, or in tree overhanging water, sometimes together with other shags.

They have an elaborate series of ritualised courtship displays at or near the nest, a bulky platform made of sticks or seaweed. Their eggs have a chalky encrustation on the surface. Both sexes share incubation. The chicks are naked at hatching but soon develop down. Both parents regurgitate food for the chicks. If a predator approaches, chicks in tree nests overhanging water will jump well before they can fly, but they are adept at climbing back up to the nest.

**King Shag**
*Leucocarbo minor*

- **Size:** 76 cm on.
- **Weight:** 2.5 kg.

- **Distribution:** New Zealand only. Breed on very-northern coast of the outer Marlborough Sounds — Duffers Reef, North Trio Islands, White Rocks, Sentinel Rock and possibly Stewart Island (south-west of Puponga Sound). They are sedentary and remain within the Marlborough Sounds, especially favouring 20–40 m deep water in the outer parts of Pelorus and Queen Charlotte Sounds.

- **Population:** In 1992, the population was 524 birds, with 166 nests recorded. Duffers Reef 69 nests, Trio 50 nests on two islands. White Rocks 30 nests, Sentinel Rock 17 nests, and possibly a few nests on Stewart Island.

- **Conservation:** Protected threatened endemic. King Shags are sometimes illegally shot by fishermen, and a few birds are caught accidentally in fishing nets. Shags are now known to have a minimal impact on fish stocks, and few are now shot. King Shags are very wary and some nests fail if boats approach colonies too closely.

- **Breeding:** Nest in colonies on small exposed islands, sometimes only a few metres above high-water mark. The nest is usually a level platform about 0.5 m in diameter, made of twigs, branchlets and kelp, and cemented with guano.

The breeding season is very long: nest activity picks up in March and reaches a peak in May. Laying is mostly in May–June. They lay 1–2 pale blue eggs (65 x 41 mm). There is no information on incubation or fledging periods.

- **Behaviour:** Sometimes roost in flocks on rocks or on mussel farm buoys, but feed solitarily.

- **Feeding:** From the Duffers Reef colony fly low and directly to their feeding grounds on average 8 km away. They spend much time early in the season collecting nest material or circling the colony. They are silent away from their colonies and make little noise at their colonies, except while displaying.

- **Diets:** Mainly seaweed-dwelling fish such as flounder, sand eels, blu cod and red cod, but sole and other flatfish are likely prey. Crayfish and crabs are occasionally taken. Preferred feeding sites are in 20–40 m deep water with a flat bottom. Average flight times are 45 seconds, with a maximum of 90 seconds recorded.