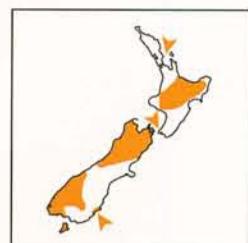


Passerines are the largest group of birds. They are small to medium sized land birds found worldwide, except on Antarctica. All species have four toes, three pointing forward and one back, well-adapted for perching. Most species are song-birds, with complex musical calls, but there are exceptions (e.g. crows). They show great diversity of form, behaviour and breeding biology.

NEW ZEALAND ROBIN (Toutouwai) *Petroica australis* Uncommon endemic

18 cm, 35 g. Inquisitive and confiding *dark slaty-grey forest bird with long thin legs and an upright stance*. Male (North I) is dark, almost black, except for white spot above bill, pale greyish-white lower breast and belly; black feathers have pale shaft streaks, and so very faintly streaked upperparts; wings dark brownish black. Female and juvenile (North I) similar, but greyer with variable paler patches on breast and throat. Male (South I) has dark grey upperparts and upper chest, distinctly divided from yellowish-white lower chest and belly; flanks variably greyish; white spot above bill; wings dark brownish black. Female and juvenile (South I) similar, usually greyer on breast with variable whitish patches. Stewart I birds have similar patterns to North I. Perches on a low trunk or branch and flies to *feed on the forest floor*; hops about and sometimes trembles one leg to induce prey to surface. Male song loud clear and sustained string of phrases, usually descending and including 'pwee-pwee-pwee' phrases; varies regionally. Call a soft 'chirp'. **Habitat:** Native and exotic forest, sometimes tall scrub. **Breeding:** Jul-Jan.



[Sp 306]



AUSTRALASIAN ROBINS *Eopsaltriidae*

About 44 species in Australasia; 3 endemic to New Zealand.

Australasian robins are small, robust, confiding forest birds with short necks and large heads, and an upright stance on moderately long, thin legs. Their bill is short, broad at the base and surrounded with abundant

bristles. Males are mostly black, grey and white with patches of red or yellow, whereas females have a duller basic colour and lack bright colours. Although superficially similar, this group is not closely related to the European Robin *Erithacus rubecula*, which belongs to the thrushes (Muscicapidae).

306. NEW ZEALAND ROBIN *Petroica australis* Plate 69

Other name: Toutouwai
Size: 18 cm, 30 g
Geographical variation: Three subspecies, each restricted to one of the main islands and its outliers: North Island Robin *longipes*, South Island Robin *australis*, and Stewart Island Robin *rakiura*.
Distribution: New Zealand only. Subfossil, midden and historical records show that Robins were widespread through the mainland of New Zealand at the time of European settlement. In the North Island, they disappeared from northern and southern parts in the early 1900s, and, apart from strong populations on Little Barrier and Kapiti Islands, they are now restricted to a band

across the central North Island from Taranaki (but not Mt Taranaki) to the Bay of Plenty and Te Urewera National Park. Introduced to Mokoia Island, Lake Rotorua (1991) and Karori Sanctuary, Wellington (2001).

In the South Island, they are quite common north of Arthur's Pass National Park, in Buller, Nelson and coastal Marlborough, but south of Arthur's Pass they are patchily distributed, with strongholds in Okarito Forest, the eastern foothills of Fiordland, the Umbrella Mountains of northern Southland, and around Dunedin. The Stewart Island Robin is moderately common on Stewart Island and on some outliers.

forests, but in some districts they use older stands of exotic plantations and scrub.

Population: Widespread and locally common; abundant on Little Barrier and Kapiti Islands and in some parts of the northern South Island.

Conservation: Protected endemic. Robins have declined since European settlement as a result of clearance of much prime lowland forest and the introduction of mammalian predators. The current distribution of Robins is puzzling, as they are common or even locally abundant in parts of the northern South Island, yet generally rare and patchily distributed elsewhere on the mainland, despite no obvious difference in habitat modification or introduced predators present. At Kowhai Bush, near Kaikoura, a colour-banded population declined from 94 to 16 adults in the space of 10 years, probably as a result of predation of adult birds by mustelids and/or rats. Robin numbers on Kapiti Island increased rapidly in the decade after the eradication of possums in the 1980s, thus showing that possums may be a serious predator or somehow alter the habitat to the detriment of Robins. On the mainland, Robins are generally in decline as a result of ongoing predation and habitat changes.

Robins are found mainly in mature native usually shortly after sunrise. The female incubates for 17-18-19 days and broods the chicks. She is called off the nest and fed 20-50 m away by the male 2-3 times an hour while incubating, and both birds feed the nestlings. The fledging period is 19-21-22 days. Single fledglings are looked after by the male, but if there are two or more, the parents divide care of the brood. This division continues until the female starts re-nesting and then the male feeds all juveniles. They start foraging c. 2 weeks after leaving the nest, but continue to be fed by their parents for 25-50 days before being ousted from the territory. Robins start breeding at 1 year old. The average annual survivorship of adult Robins at Kowhai Bush, during a period when they were stable, was about 70%, giving a mean life expectancy of c. 3 years; however, the oldest Robin recorded lived over 16 years. **Behaviour:** Robins are territorial all year but especially so in the breeding season, when the male patrols his patch and sings from prominent perches. The main territorial song of the male is loud and clear, and consists of a variety of simple notes strung together and sometimes sustained for half an hour, broken only by short pauses. Robins also give a short 'chirp' as a contact call. In aggressive encounters between birds, they raise their crown feathers, but in encounters with other species, including humans, they often flash the white frontal spot in the centre of their forehead. In some areas, Robins are shy and secretive, but elsewhere they are bold and can be induced to come near by clearing a patch of leaf litter and then sitting quietly nearby.

Breeding: Robins keep their territory all year, and usually keep the same partner year after year. From March to July, the main song is a downscale, but in August-December males mainly sing their full territorial song. From July, they start courtship feeding. The female takes about 5 days to build its nest, a bulky cup of twigs, bark, fibres and moss, bound together with cobwebs and lined with tree-fern scales, moss, fine grasses and occasionally with feathers or wool. It is usually 1-4-11 m up in the fork of a tree trunk or fork between large branches, and quite often the nest is built in an old nest of a Robin, Song Thrush, Blackbird or Bellbird. Laying is in July-January, during which time each pair may raise up to four broods, but if their nests fail, they can re-lay up to six times in a season.

Feeding: Diet is mainly invertebrates, supplemented with small fruits in summer and autumn. Main prey are earthworms, spiders, amphipods, beetles, moths and caterpillars, weta, cicadas, stick insects, snails and slugs. Most are caught on the forest floor. Robins often perch on a low branch, supplejack or trunk of a sapling, scanning the ground before flying down to grab their prey. When on the forest floor, they sometimes tremble one foot as a means of inducing prey to move in response to the vibrations caused. They sometimes glean insects from leaves or under bark on a branch or trunk, and occasionally

They lay 2-3-4 eggs; first clutches are mainly of 2 eggs, and later clutches mainly of 3. The eggs are cream with purplish-brown spots (25 x 18.5 mm, 4.5 g) and are laid daily,

take insects or fruit from a tree while hovering, but only rarely catch flying insects on the wing.

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