

New Zealand shore plover

Thinornis novaeseelandiae

20 cm

NEW ZEALAND ENDEMIC, NATIONALLY CRITICAL

Other name: tuturuatu



Adult male New Zealand shore plover, Rangatira.
Photo: Don Merton.



Adult female New Zealand shore plover, Rangatira.
Photo: Don Merton.

Identification

Shore plovers are small, stocky birds with white, black and brown plumage. They have a brown cap, with a white ring separating this from the dark face and neck. The face is black in the male and dark brown in the female. The bill is red with a black tip, which is more extensive and less sharply defined in the female; the legs are orange.



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Distribution and ecology

Shore plover were once widespread in coastal areas of New Zealand, but by the late 1800s they became confined to the Chatham Islands. There is currently only one natural wild population on Rangatira, where there are about 130 birds, comprising about 45 breeding pairs. Recent transfers from Rangatira to Mangere have led to the establishment of a small population there.

The discovery of a tiny shore plover population on Western Reef in 1999 came as a surprise to all those involved with the species.

Unfortunately this tiny population (21 birds at the highest count) declined steadily after its discovery to only one male in 2003. The last male was captured in June 2003 and taken into captivity at the National Wildlife Centre at Mount Bruce, north of Masterton, where it has mated with a captive female (ex Rangatira stock) already held there, and produced a single male chick in 2003/04. Progeny, with their unique Western Reef genetic material, will be returned to the Chatham Islands for establishment of another wild population.

Habitat use by shore plover appears to be flexible. On Rangatira they use the rocky coastline, wave platforms, salt meadows and freshwater seeps. However, historically shore plover were recorded in estuarine and sandy habitats on the New Zealand mainland. In recent releases of captive-bred shore plover, the birds have often favoured sandy habitats. Shore plover feed on a wide range of small aquatic and terrestrial invertebrates. Bulky nests are built under the cover of vegetation, logs or boulders. The breeding season is September–February (occasionally to April); laying (2–3 eggs) peaks in October.

Threats and conservation

The retreat of shore plover from their traditional range coincided with the spread of cats and Norway rats during the 1800s. Shore plover disappeared from Mangere and Pitt Island after the introduction of cats. The cause of the more recent decline of the tiny shore plover population on Western Reef is not clear, but it followed a rapid increase in the reef's fur seal population. Current threats to shore plover survival on Rangatira are the introduction of predators or disease, or habitat modification such as fire. Forest and vine regeneration of former farmland on Rangatira has caused some reduction in breeding habitat for shore plover; this process is continuing, although now threatens only a small proportion of the population.

The recovery programme for shore plover aims to protect and extend the species' range within the Chatham Islands, and to re-establish populations in other parts of New Zealand. To facilitate this, a captive population was set up on mainland New Zealand to breed birds to found new wild populations. To date, a population has been established on an island off the east coast of the North Island. Transfers have also been undertaken within the Chatham Islands. Transfers from Rangatira to Mangere in the early 1970s failed to establish a population. However, three transfers conducted in 2001–03 were successful, with several pairs now breeding on Mangere. Further transfers are planned.



Juvenile New Zealand shore plover, Rangatira, February 2004. Photo: Don Merton.



New Zealand shore plover nest with newly hatched chicks, Rangatira, December 1983. Photo: Colin Miskelly.