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

Arun Books, Orewa, New Zealand.

Summary of shags: pp 75-76.

Little shag: pp 80-81.



### LITTLE SHAG

**Family** Phalacrocoracidae

**Species** *Phalacrocorax melanoleucos*

**Common name** Little Shag

**Other names** Little Pied Shag or White-throated Shag

**Status** Native

**Abundance** Common

**Size** 560 mm (cf sparrow 145 mm, Pied Shag 810 mm)

**Habitat** A bird of coastlines, estuaries, harbours, inland rivers and lakes.

**New Zealand range** Well-spread including Stewart Island.

**Range Worldwide** Widely spread from East Borneo, Java, New Guinea, Australia and New Caledonia to New Zealand. The Australian and New Caledonian birds are totally pied having all white underparts.

**Phases** Comes in four distinct plumage phases. These are – a white-faced phase, a white-faced plus a white-throated phase, a white-faced and totally white underparts phase and a white-faced and a smudgy underparts phase. To complicate this species further, the fledglings come in two phases. One phase

is totally black, but separated from the Little Black Shag by a yellow bill. Little Blacks have lead coloured bills. The other fledgling phase has a smudgy white face and all white underparts. It also has a yellow bill.

### **Description**

**Head** White face and throat is common on all phases. The white colouring extends up the face to the crown with only a narrow belt of black being visible on the top of the head. A very small crest separates black phase juvenile birds from Little Black Shags. **Upperparts** Black. **Underparts** Variable as above. **Bill** Yellow. **Feet and legs** Black.

### **Conspicuous characteristics**

- Sits in social groupings on harbour and lake jetties and on lake shorelines, often with all phases including the fledglings in the one group.
- Birds nest in loose colonies sometimes in large numbers. Egg laying is well spread over the months of August until March.
- Birds follow flight paths from breeding colonies to feeding grounds.
- Birds tend to feed singly and not in packs as does the Little Black Shag.
- Birds can spend up to 20 seconds under water in each dive for food.

**Call** Guttural croaks and squeals at the nesting site only.

**Nest** A colonial nester making a twig nest in trees. Up to 4 bluish-green eggs.

### **Where to find – North Island**

**Auckland** – Orakei Basin Birds roost here. P. 298.

**Rotorua** – Okere Falls on the Kaituna River. P. 325.

**Coastlines and waterways** – Found in most districts where there is water.

### **Where to find – Stewart Island**

**Ulva Island** – Little Shags nest alongside Pied Shags near the wharf. P. 367.



## SHAGS

**Groupings of New Zealand shags** New Zealand's shags are grouped in the one genus of *Phalacrocorax*. Previously they were grouped as –

- **Black-footed shags – Phalacrocorax** including Black Shag (*Phalacrocorax carbo*), Little Black Shag (*P. sulcirostris*), Pied Shag (*P. varius*), and Little Shag (*P. melanoleucos*). This group, apart from the Pied Shag which only occasionally ranges inland, are birds of both coastal waters and inland fresh water lakes and rivers. They are all tree-nesting birds although Black Shags will sometimes nest on rock ledges and sand banks.
- **Pink-footed shags – Leucocarbo** including King Shag (*Leucocarbo carunculatus*), Stewart Island Shag (*L. chalconotus*), Bounty Island Shag (*L. ranfurlyi*), Chatham Island Shag (*L. onslowi*), Campbell Island Shag (*L. campbelli*), Auckland Island Shag (*L. colensoi*) and Emperor Shag (*L. atriceps*). The pink-footed group are strictly coastal birds which breed on rock ledges.
- **Orange-footed shags – Stictocarbo** including Pitt Island Shag (*S. featherstoni*), Spotted Shag (*S. punctatus*) and its subspecies the Blue Shag (*S. p. steadi*) which has darker upper plumage and lacks the wide white facial and neck stripe of the spotted, this being reduced to a narrow band of white which does not extend in front of the eye. These species are strictly coastal and nest on rock ledges in inaccessible places.

### Characteristics of Shag species

- They dive for fish, some singly, but others like the Little Black Shag, in packs.
- After fishing, wing-spreading habits are common to all species but more so with the black-footed varieties. This latter action may be to help dry water-logged wings, as shags have inadequate feather waterproofing, possessing a grease gland at the bottom of the neck which is not equipped to cater for long under-water fishing excursions. It is possible a lack of feather waterproofing hinders flotation of swimming birds and so enables them to spend longer under the water.
- All New Zealand shags have similar flight patterns usually flying low to the water with necks outstretched. At times though they will fly at higher altitudes. Some also have the ability to raise a crest during the breeding season.