



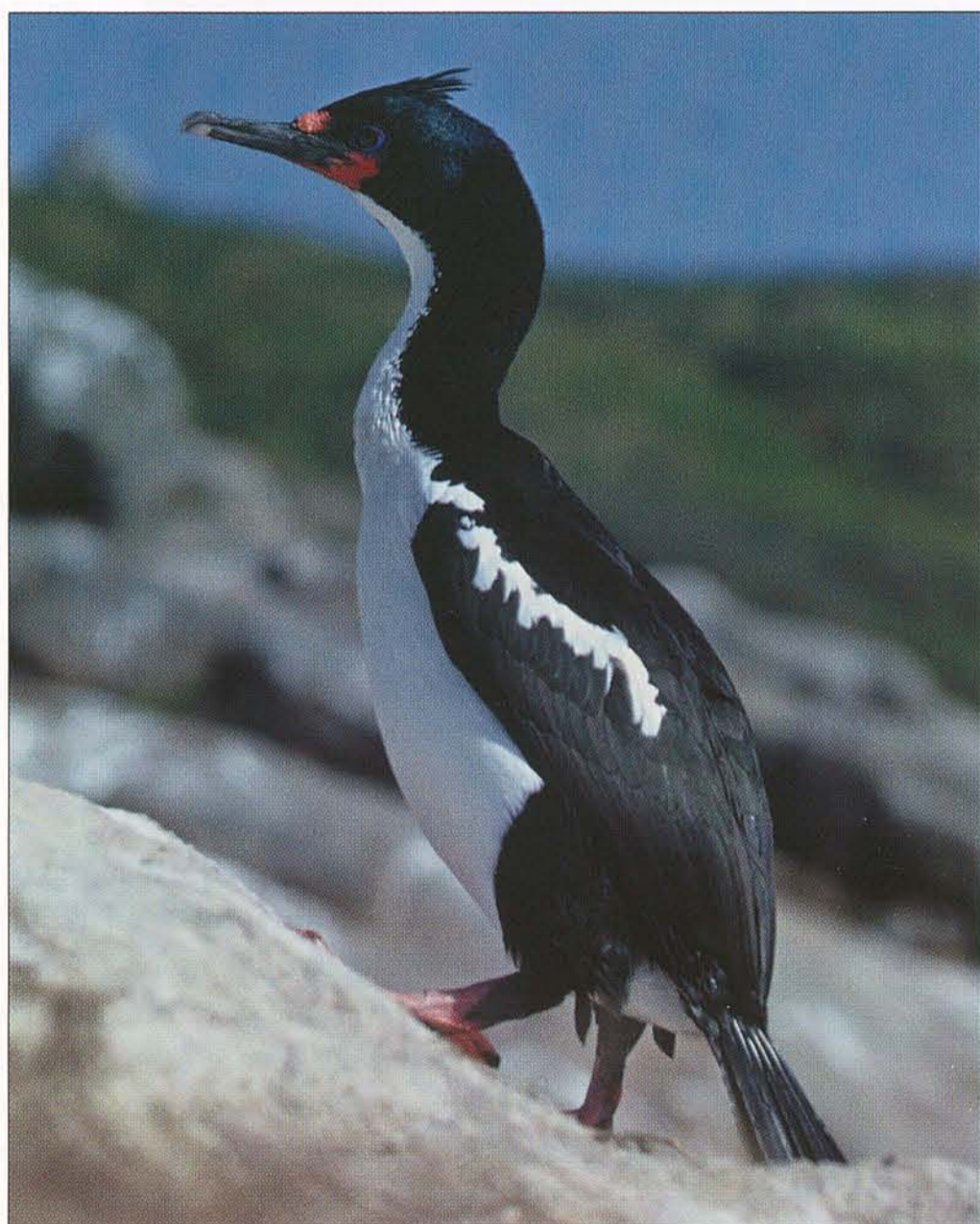
Chatham Island shag *Leucocarbo onslowi*

63 cm

CHATHAM ISLANDS ENDEMIC, RANGE RESTRICTED

Identification

The Chatham Island shag is a large shag with a blue eye-ring, orange fleshy growths above the bill, and orange facial skin below the bill. Plumage is mostly iridescent black, with white on the breast and belly, and white patches on the upper wing. The feet are pink. Sexes are alike. The facial skin colour fades outside the breeding season. In flight, the head is held lower than the body.



Breeding distribution

Adult Chatham Island shag,
Star Keys.
Photo: John Kendrick
(DOC).

Distribution and ecology

Chatham Island shag breeding colonies are located on headlands or stacks off the coast of Chatham Island, in Te Whanga Lagoon, and on Rabbit Island, North East Reef and Star Keys. In a census of all shags in the Chatham Islands in 1997, 842 breeding pairs of Chatham Island shag were counted at ten discrete breeding sites. However, a census in 2003 found only 270 pairs at the same sites; it is not yet known whether this is due to natural variation or a serious decline.

Chatham Island shags typically feed offshore, but occasionally do so near the shoreline. They usually feed alone but often roost in flocks of 50 or more birds, and breed in colonies. Nests are made of seaweed and other vegetation cemented with guano. Up to four pale blue eggs are laid over August–December.

Threats and conservation

The largest colonies of Chatham Island shags occur at predator-free sites, but some colonies are still present on Chatham Island and are subject to disturbance by feral cats, weka, possums, pigs, sheep, cattle, dogs and people (including illegal shooting). Disturbance by people can lead to birds stampeding from nests, causing breakage of eggs, or subsequent egg or chick predation by gulls. Fur seals disturb nesting at the Star Keys, and have occupied former colony sites there.

No Chatham Island shag colonies currently have legal protection, although a number of colonies have some measure of protection by virtue of their inaccessibility and isolation. Further surveys of breeding sites, and counts of breeding pairs, are required to determine whether the huge decrease in breeding pairs between 1997 and 2003 was due to a single poor breeding season, or was caused by a population decline.



Chatham Island shag colony,
Cape Fournier,
January 1978.
Photo: Reg Cotter.



Chatham Island shag colony,
Cape Fournier,
January 1979.
Photo: Colin Miskelly.