

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. Sexes alike. In flight, wings short and broad, and neck is extended. Swim with head held uptilted and body low in the water.

**CHATHAM ISLAND SHAG** *Leucocarbo onslowi*

Locally common endemic

63 cm, 2.25 kg. Like King Shag, but orange caruncles are large and prominent. **Habitat:** Coastal and offshore waters around the Chatham Is only. **Breeding:** Aug–Mar. [Sp 97]



**SHAGS**

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 *Stictocarbo*.

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 crustacea with their long hooked bill. They use their webbed feet to swim underwater. The outermost toe is

Phalacrocoracidae

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 islets, or in trees 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.

**97. CHATHAM ISLAND SHAG**

*Leucocarbo onslowi*

Plate 24

**Size:** 63 cm, 2.25 kg  
**Distribution:** Breed only on Chatham Island (including Motuhinahina Island in Te Whanga Lagoon), Star Keys, and Rabbit Island off Pitt Island. They feed through coastal waters of the Chatham group and rarely in brackish water in Te Whanga Lagoon.  
**Population:** Moderately common (842 pairs at 10 colonies in 1997, but only 271 pairs at 13 colonies in 2003). The largest colony is on the Star Keys.  
**Conservation:** Protected rare endemic. Some are illegally shot by fishermen, and several accessible mainland colonies (e.g. Cape Fournier) have been abandoned because of human disturbance and associated gull predation. Colonies are sometimes disturbed by fur seals.  
**Breeding:** Nest in colonies on islands and exposed rocky headlands, usually well above

high-water mark. The nest is a level platform about 0.5 m in diameter, made of twigs, iceplants and seaweed. Laying is mostly in August–December, but there is some variation both between and within colonies. They lay 1–2–3–4 pale blue eggs (61 x 44 mm). There is no information on incubation or fledging periods.  
**Behaviour:** Sometimes roost in flocks of 100+ birds but generally feed alone.  
**Feeding:** Diet is mainly small (<25 cm long) fish, especially flatfish, opalfish and bullies, and the occasional squid, cuttlefish and octopus. Most are taken from deep offshore waters, but birds occasionally feeding close inshore or in rockpools.

**Reading:** Fleming, C.A. 1939. *Emu* 38: 380–413. Imber, M.J. 1994. *Notornis* 41(S): 97–108. Lallas, C. 1983. PhD thesis, Univ Otago.