

Darters are rather like slim, long-necked shags. When swimming, only their head and neck are visible. They spend long periods perched, mostly in trees, with wings and tail spread.

**DARTER** *Anhinga melanogaster*

Rare Australian vagrant

90 cm, 1750 g. Large but slim, *very long thin neck, straight dagger-like yellow bill* and very long tail. A white stripe runs from below eye down side of *strongly kinked neck*; prominent *cream streaks on upper wings and long scapular feathers*. Male otherwise all brownish black except for red patch on foreneck. Female and immatures paler with upperparts grey-brown and underparts white or pale buff. In flight, long broad wings and kinked neck; rapid shallow wingbeats interspersed with glides. **Habitat:** Lakes, coastal lagoons and estuaries. [Sp 103]



**DARTERS**

**Anhingidae**

2 species; 1 vagrant reaches New Zealand.

large birds resemble shags but are slimmer and have a long, thin, unhooked bill and a very long snaky neck. They have long stiff tails and long rounded wings, which are held out to dry when the birds perch after swimming.

Between them, the two species of darter have a near worldwide distribution (not Europe or high latitudes) in freshwater habitats. These

**103. DARTER** *Anhinga melanogaster*

Plate 23

**Size:** 90 cm, 1750 g

**Geographical variation:** Three subspecies: *melanogaster* in Asia from India to Indonesia and the Philippines; *rufa* in Africa, Madagascar and the Middle East; and *novaehollandiae* in Australia and New Guinea.

**Distribution:** Breed widely, from Africa through Asia to Australia. In Australia, most breeding colonies are in the Murray–Darling Basin and along the eastern seaboard, but after breeding they disperse widely. The only confirmed New Zealand records are a fresh skin of an adult female found nailed to the

wall of a shed near Hokitika (January 1874), Kaitaia (December 1992) and Wellington Harbour (December 2003). There have been several unconfirmed sightings of Darters in Northland in the 1990s. Given their dispersive nature in Australia, and their use of columns of rising hot air to glide and soar from one place to another, they are expected to reach New Zealand again.

**Feeding:** Feed in lakes, ponds and slow-moving streams by sinking slowly underwater and then swimming with webbed feet to dart their neck out and stab fish on their

needle-like bill. On surfacing, the bird tosses the fish into the air and catches it head first. Sometimes they eat insects caught above the water. Dives last c. 30 seconds, with only a

5-second pause between dives.

**Reading:** van Tets, G.F. & Scarlett, R.J. 1972. *Notornis* 19: 85–86.