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Variable oystercatcher: pp 129-130.

**Variable Oystercatcher** (*Torea tai*) *Haematopus unicolor* J.R. Forster 1844, Endemic  
5/11/1769 Mercury Bay, Coromandel

On the 5th November 1769 at Mercury Bay, Banks (1962) noted "several Birds were shot, like sea pies but Black with red bills and feet", clearly black phase Variable Oystercatchers. On the 11th November 1769 at Mercury Bay, Cook (1771) also recorded "Here is likewise pretty plenty of Wild Fowl, such as Shags, Ducks, Curlews (= Godwits?), and a Black bird, about as big as a Crow, with a long, sharp bill of a colour between Red and Yellow". Forster collected this species later in Dusky Sound in 1773. The species was not described until 1844.

There was much confusion regarding the number of forms and species of oystercatchers in New Zealand until the mid-20th century (e.g. Oliver 1955). Falla (1939) thought that black oystercatchers belonged to two species: *H. unicolor* a variable species, and *H. reischeki* a black species, and this confused everybody terribly for some years. Oliver (1955) could find no important differences between three species currently recognised: *H. longirostris* (the Australian Pied Oystercatcher), *H. chathamensis*, and pied-phase *H. unicolor*, and lumped them all in one species. He also thought the black phase *H. unicolor* was a separate species.

Kinsky (1970) subsumed *H. reischeki* in *H. unicolor*, although as late as 1973, Heppleston could write of *H. unicolor* comprising two subspecies. Baker (1973) finally clarified the taxonomy of

