Text and images extracted from Aikman, H. & Miskelly, C. (2004). *Birds of the Chatham Islands*. Department of Conservation, Wellington. Pages 47-49.

Chatham Island oystercatcher
Haematopus chathamensis

48 cm

CHATHAM ISLANDS ENDEMIC, NATIONALLY CRITICAL

Other names: torea, Chatham Island pied oystercatcher

Chatham Island oystercatcher, Rangatira. Photo: Don Merton.

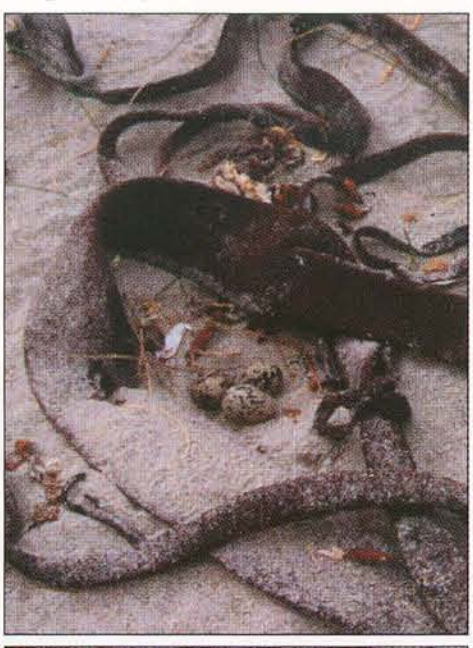
Identification

The Chatham Island oystercatcher is a large black-and-white wader with a long red bill and sturdy pink legs. It is most similar to the pied phase of the variable oystercatcher (*H. unicolor*) of the New Zealand mainland. Females have longer, thinner bills and are slightly larger than males. The similar but smaller New Zealand pied oystercatcher (*H. finschi*) occasionally visits the Chatham Islands, but has not been recorded interacting with Chatham Island oystercatchers.

Distribution and ecology

The Chatham Island oystercatcher is the rarest oystercatcher in the world. It is found on Chatham and Pitt Islands, Rangatira, and Mangere, and occasionally the Star Keys, on both rocky coastlines and sandy beaches. In the southern part of its range (Rangatira, Mangere, and Pitt Island) and in southern Chatham Island their habitat is dominated by rocky habitats with extensive wave platforms. In the northern part of the range they use a mix of sandy beaches and rocky wave platforms, especially near stream mouths.

Above: Chatham Island oystercatcher nest in an old car tyre placed as a nest platform, north coast Chatham Island, October 2001. Photo: Reg Cotter.



Top right: Chatham Island oystercatcher nest, north coast Chatham Island, November 2003. Right: Chatham Island oystercatcher chicks hiding in tide-wrack bull kelp, north coast Chatham Island, November 2003. Photos: Colin Miskelly.

Oystercatcher numbers have increased substantially in recent years in response to management, particularly in northern Chatham Island. Since 1987, the breeding population has increased from 42 to 85 pairs, and the total population has increased from fewer than 150 to around 290 birds by 2004, with the bulk of the population on north Chatham Island beaches. They form monogamous long-term pair bonds, and are strongly territorial during the breeding season; many pairs stay attached to their breeding territories year round. Eggs (2–3) are well camouflaged, and laid in a simple scrape in the sand, or in a depression or small crevice among rocks or driftwood, during October–January.

Threats and conservation

The key threat to oystercatchers on Chatham Island is predation by feral cats. They are the main predator of oystercatcher eggs, and also prey on chicks and adults. Weka and red-billed gulls take some oystercatcher eggs, and trampling by stock is a threat to nests. Disturbance during nesting by stock, people and dogs wandering along the coast causes birds to leave the nest, increasing the risk of eggs becoming chilled or overheating, and exposing them to predators. Crushing of eggs by quad bikes and vehicles used to launch dive boats is also an ongoing threat at some sites, particularly Waitangi West.
Changes in coastal vegetation, and the establishment of introduced marram grass, appear to have had an adverse effect on oystercatcher breeding. Marram stabilises the dunes, causing the beach profile to become steeper. This reduces the area of suitable beach available for oystercatchers to nest on, forcing the birds to nest further down the beach profile. There the likelihood of losing nests to high tides or storm surges is greater.

Chatham Island oystercatcher, north coast Chatham Island. Photo: Peter Moore.

Chatham Island oystercatchers received little scientific attention until the 1970s, and management was not attempted until the 1990s. There was sporadic predator control and management in northern Chatham Island in the mid 1990s, resulting in 1–11 chicks being produced per year from 10–14 pairs. Research, focused on the breeding biology and habitat use of the oystercatcher population on northern Chatham Island, was completed in 1998, following which more intensive management was initiated. This was coupled with a further research programme monitoring colour-banded birds, and using video surveillance to assess the effectiveness of management, to establish the causes of nest failure, and to identify key predators. Intensive management is continuing, and research is to continue into oystercatcher population trends and dynamics to guide recovery effort. Management involves trapping key predators, particularly feral cats, and protecting nests by fencing off sections of beach. Where this is not possible, individual nests are fenced to keep stock away. The problem of high seas washing away nests is tackled in two ways. Firstly, vulnerable nests are gradually moved up the beach, away from the waves, without disturbing the birds. In some instances, the birds are encouraged to nest in old car tyres attached to boards which can be dragged higher up the beach. The longer-term solution is dune restoration, where marram grass is removed and native vegetation restored to create a more open dune environment, where oystercatchers can nest further back from the shore with less risk of predation. Application of these techniques to protect oystercatchers along the coast between Maunganui and Wharekauri has resulted in 25–35 chicks fledging each year, with breeding success about 3 times greater than at unmanaged sites.