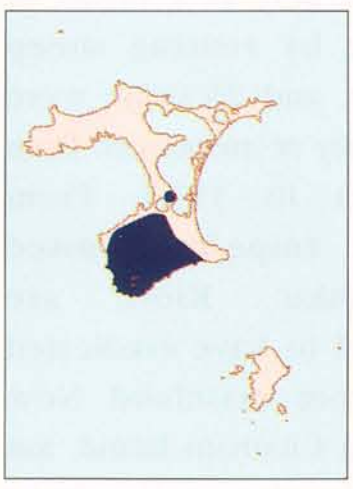
Text and images extracted from Aikman, H. & Miskelly, C. (2004). *Birds of the Chatham Islands*. Department of Conservation, Wellington. Pages 80, 81.

Parea
Hemiphaga chathamensis 55 cm

CHATHAM ISLANDS ENDEMIC, NATIONALLY CRITICAL

Other names: Chatham Island pigeon, pigeon



Parea on nest, Chatham Island, October 1993. Photo: Ralph Powlesland (DOC).

Identification

The parea is one of the world's heaviest pigeons and is about one-fifth heavier than the New Zealand pigeon (kereru/kukupa; *H. novaeseelandiae*). Its dorsal plumage and upper breast is more purple and pearl-grey than the New Zealand pigeon, but it has the same white lower breast, shoulder straps and belly. The bill is red with an orange tip (the latter is lacking in New Zealand pigeon). Sexes are alike. Parea fly with noisy wing-beats, and during the breeding season they perform conspicuous display dives, flapping upwards from their perch, then stalling and diving sharply down. The parea was until recently considered a subspecies of the New Zealand pigeon. Based on its larger size, plumage differences, and its confinement to the Chatham Islands, the parea is now given full species status.

Distribution and ecology

Parea were formerly widespread and common on Rangatira, Mangere, Chatham and Pitt Islands. By 1938, few were seen in northern Chatham Island, but they were moderately plentiful in the more extensive areas of forest in the south. Parea disappeared from northern Chatham Island forests in the 1970s, although there have been a number of sightings there in recent years. They disappeared from Mangere and Rangatira over 100 years ago when the islands were largely cleared for farming, and the Pitt Island population apparently crashed following a large forest fire in the mid 1900s. Currently, only a few parea are thought to be present on Pitt Island, and there has been no recorded breeding for many years. Two birds are present on Rangatira from a transfer there in the 1980s.

Parea have an important role in maintaining healthy forest structure: many Chatham Island tree species are thought to be dependent on parea for seed dispersal. Parea can breed all year round, but nest predominately during winter and spring, laying a single white egg in a robust nest of twigs 0–10 metres off the ground. The timing of nesting and the proportion of pairs that breed vary between years in response to the abundance and quality of available food, particularly hoho fruit.

Threats and conservation

Parea, Chatham Island. Photo: John Mason.

The decline of parea had a number of causes, including loss of forest habitat, predation of adults and chicks by feral cats, and probably predation of eggs and chicks by rodents and possums. Competition from browsing animals, particularly possums, is another factor in their decline, and hunting by people for food may have also contributed. With the exception of hunting, these causes of past decline still threaten the population today.

Concern about the decline in parea numbers was raised during the 1970s. In 1983, 13 parea were translocated from southern Chatham Island to Rangatira, but only a couple of birds remained on the island, and successful breeding was not recorded. The parea population reached its lowest level of about 40 birds in 1990, confined to forest in southern Chatham Island. A 4-year research programme, habitat protection and predator control led to an increase to about 150 birds by 1995. Habitat protection and predator control are ongoing in the Tuku Nature Reserve and adjacent conservation covenants to protect both parea and taiko. There is no precise estimate of the total population today, but the number of sightings of parea in southern Chatham Island indicates that the population has continued to increase slowly. A survey in 1999 found a slight increase in numbers in areas where the forest was protected and there was predator control; there was a decline in areas further south that were not receiving protection.