

Passerines are the largest group of birds. They are small to medium sized land birds found worldwide, except on Antarctica. All species have four toes, three pointing forward and one back, well-adapted for perching. Most species are song-birds, with complex musical calls, but there are exceptions (e.g. crows). They show great diversity of form, behaviour and breeding biology.

WHITEHEAD (Popokatea) *Mohoua albicilla*

Locally common endemic

15 cm; ♂ 18.5 g, ♀ 14.5 g. Male has *white head and underparts*, with contrasting black bill, eye and legs; upperparts pale brown. Female and immature similar, but crown and nape shaded brown. Usually in small fast-moving *noisy* feeding flocks or family groups, high in canopy, uttering harsh chattering calls, trills and slurs. Male song can be clear and Canary-like: 'peek-o, peek-o, peek-o'. **Habitat:** Native and exotic forest, and scrub of North I. **Breeding:** Sep–Jan.



WHISTLERS and allies

Pachycephalidae

28 species confined to Southeast Asia, Australasia and the southwestern Pacific; 3 endemic species in New Zealand.

stout bills for catching insects amongst foliage and from crevices on branches and trunks. Most species have loud and varied calls, usually melodious but sometimes harsh and scolding.

These small, robust forest and scrub birds have relatively large rounded heads and short

298. WHITEHEAD *Mohoua albicilla*

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Other name: Popokatea
Size: 15 cm; males 18.5 g, females 14.5 g
Distribution: The North Island and some offshore islands only. Subfossil remains of Whiteheads have been found throughout the North Island, and they were still widespread at the time of European settlement. However, they disappeared from Northland in the 1870s, from the Auckland area in the 1880s, and from Great Barrier and Arid (Rakitu) Islands since the 1950s. They are now widely but patchily distributed in native forests, some older exotic plantations and older stands of scrub on the mainland south of a line from

Te Aroha to Mt Pirongia. They remain abundant on Little Barrier and Kapiti Islands, and have been successfully introduced to Tiritiri Matangi Island, and Mokoia Island in Lake Rotorua.

Population: Widespread and locally common on the North Island, abundant on Little Barrier and Kapiti Islands.

Conservation: Protected endemic. Whiteheads declined about the time of European settlement with the loss of much lowland forest, and disappeared from the northern North Island in the late 1800s. They seem to have stabilised in their current distribution

and have colonised exotic pine plantations in the central North Island, especially stands with a dense understorey of native shrubs.

Breeding: In late winter, family groups of Whiteheads start to defend a territory. The group consist of a breeding pair, or sometimes two breeding females, with 0–6 surviving young from previous years. Nest-building starts in early September. The nest is built by the main female in each group in 4–7 days. It is a compact, deep cup of twigs, dry grass, leaves and leaf skeletons, rootlets, strips of bark, moss and lichen, bound with cobwebs and lined with tree-fern fibres, feathers and wool. It is placed in the canopy of the forest or sometimes in a shrub or low tree 1–15 m above the ground. During nest-building and the following 2–3 days before eggs are laid, the male closely guards the female. Laying is from late September to late December, mostly between mid-October and mid-November. Usually only one brood is raised each year and most late nests are replacement clutches, but a few true second clutches are laid while helpers feed the fledglings from the first nest.

pair and their progeny from previous years, especially young males. In autumn and winter, each group has a larger home range centred on its territory, but home ranges overlap and sometimes groups coalesce to form flocks of up to 30 birds. Whiteheads are vocal all day and all year, except during the late summer moult. Territorial song peaks in spring. Calls help to maintain contact within flocks and to proclaim territories. Only males give the loud territorial calls, usually from a prominent perch. These calls are varied, based on a phrase starting with several chirps, followed by a string of clear canary-like chimes or 'peek-o, peek-o, peek-o' calls and descending slurs and finishing with a chuckle. The contact call in flocks is a single harsh 'cheert', which forms a constant chatter in the distance, and the alarm calls are an excited, loud 'chirrt' and a ringing 'chee-chee-chee'.

Feeding: Diet is mainly invertebrates but includes some fruit. Main prey are spiders, beetles, caterpillars and moths, gleaned from leaves, twigs and branches in the canopy and understorey, sometimes by hanging upside down. They feed on invertebrates dislodged by other feeding birds, and occasionally on insects under loose bark on trunks and large branches; rarely feed on the ground. They eat some fruit of native shrubs, especially mahoe, matipo, coprosma and hangehange.

In the hand: Adult males have an almost pure white head and shiny black legs, but the crown and nape is shaded brown in adult females and juveniles of both sexes. Males are larger and heavier than females, but most birds can be sexed from a combination of wing and weight, even though throughout the North Island there is some overlap: wing 67–71.5–77 cf. 62–66–70 mm, and weight 16–18.5–21 cf. 12–14.5–19.5 g. Juvenile females in their first winter can be separated from adult females by having fleshy rictal flanges and pale grey (not dark grey) legs.

They lay 2–3–4 eggs (20 x 15 mm, 2.5 g), at 24-hour intervals. The eggs are white, variably speckled orange-brown. Only the main female incubates for 17–18–19 days, and broods. The male and any helpers help to feed the chicks during the fledging period of 16–17–19 days and after they have flown. The chicks start feeding themselves c. 10 days after fledging, but still beg and are fed at up to 9 months old. Young are capable of breeding at 1 year old in low-density populations, but at high densities, such as on Little Barrier Island, breeding is delayed for several years, and most young birds act as helpers instead. Adult survivorship on Little Barrier Island averaged 82%, giving a life expectancy of 5 years, but the oldest bird lived over 16 years.

Whiteheads are the host of the Long-tailed Cuckoo, and family groups can sometimes be seen in summer feeding a cuckoo chick many times larger than themselves.

Behaviour: Gregarious; in small flocks all year. Whiteheads often join feeding parakeets, Saddlebacks or Silveryeyes to catch the insects they dislodge. In the breeding season, the strictly territorial groups are usually a main

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