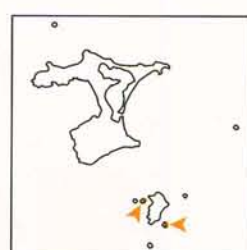


Passerines are the largest group of birds. They are small to medium sized land birds found worldwide, except on Antarctica. All species have four toes, three pointing forward and one back, well-adapted for perching. Most species are song-birds, with complex musical calls, but there are exceptions (e.g.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

BLACK ROBIN *Petroica traversi*

Rare endemic

15 cm; ♂ 25 g, ♀ 22 g. Small completely black forest bird with short fine black bill, long thin legs and an upright stance. Feeds mostly on the forest floor or in low branches. Male song a clear simple phrase of 5–7 notes. Call a high-pitched single note. Formerly extremely rare; in 1979 there were just 5 birds, including 1 productive female 'Old Blue' (depicted), but with intensive management the population has recovered to about 150. **Habitat:** Forest and scrub of predator-free islands in Chatham group and Pitt Island. **Breeding:** Oct–Jan. [Sp 307]



AUSTRALASIAN ROBINS

Eopsaltriidae

About 44 species in Australasia; 3 endemic to New Zealand.

bristles. Males are mostly black, grey and white with patches of red or yellow, whereas females have a duller basic colour and lack bright colours. Although superficially similar, this group is not closely related to the European Robin *Erithacus rubecula*, which belongs to the thrushes (Muscicapidae).

Australasian robins are small, robust, confident forest birds with short necks and large heads, and an upright stance on moderately long, thin legs. Their bill is short, broad at the base and surrounded with abundant

307. BLACK ROBIN *Petroica traversi*

Plate 69

Size: 15 cm; males 25 g, females 22 g
Distribution: Chatham Islands only. Subfossil and midden records show that Black Robins were once widespread through the Chathams group, but by the 1870s they had become restricted to Mangere and Little Mangere Islands. They disappeared from Mangere about 1880, but a few persisted on Little Mangere. In 1976–77, all seven Black Robins were shifted from Little Mangere Island to Mangere, and in the early 1980s some were taken to South East Island, where they subsequently became established. They are now found throughout forest and scrub on Mangere and South East Islands.

eggs were fostered to Tomtit nests on South East Island, and the three resultant chicks were reintroduced to Mangere Island, taking the population to 12 birds. Since then, cross-fostering eggs and chicks to Tomtits, to boost Black Robin productivity, became an essential part of the recovery programme. Black Robins were permanently introduced to South East Island in 1983. With cross-fostering, the population reached 100 birds by autumn 1989, and since then Black Robins have continued to increase without further intervention to 150+ birds.

Population: 155 birds in autumn 1994: Mangere Island 40, South East Island 115.
Conservation: Protected threatened endemic. The intensive management of the Black Robin, by the Wildlife Service and then the Department of Conservation, is one of the world's outstanding conservation success stories. When rediscovered on Little Mangere Island in 1938, there were 20–35 pairs. Over the years, the habitat deteriorated and the population had declined to just seven birds in 1976. These five males and two females were transferred to a small forest patch on nearby Mangere Island, which was clear of the cats that had caused their disappearance from the island in the 1880s. The Black Robins continued to decline, and by 1979 there were only five birds left, including just one productive pair.

Breeding: Black Robins maintain their territory all year, and usually keep the same partner year after year. From June onwards, males start to sing their territorial song, and from September they start courtship feeding. The female normally builds 2–3 nests, but only one is completed. It is a neat open cup of twigs, bark, leaves and moss, held together with spider webs, and thickly lined with moss and feathers. They usually build in a shallow cavity; a hollow branch or rotten stump, sometimes among rocks, and occasionally in an old Blackbird nest in a tangle of vines. They readily use nest boxes. Most eggs are laid in October–November, and each pair usually raises only one brood a year; however, they re-lay if they lose a clutch, and this behaviour was used to induce Black Robins to lay up to three clutches in a season through to January.

In 1979–88, the Wildlife Service carried out intensive management, which included supplementary feeding to boost breeding, protection of nests from seabirds and starlings, and, in 1980, the cross-fostering of eggs and chicks to Chatham Island Warblers; however, the warblers were unable to raise Black Robin chicks to fledging age. In 1981, female 'Old Blue' laid three clutches. Two clutches of three

They lay 1–2–3 cream eggs (22 x 17 mm) with purplish-brown blotches and spots. The eggs are laid at 24-hour intervals, normally in the morning. The female incubates for 17–18–19 days and broods the chicks. Both parents feed the chicks during their fledging period of 20–22–23 days. Young are capable of breeding at 1 year old, but most do not start until 2 years old. The average annual

survivorship of Black Robins from 1980 to 1991 was 78%, giving a mean life expectancy of c. 4 years; however, the key female 'Old Blue' lived for 12+ years.

have a high-pitched, single-note contact call. **Feeding:** Diet is entirely invertebrates such as caterpillars, spiders, beetles, aphids, fly larvae and weta, mostly taken from the forest floor or from low branches. Black Robins generally hop when feeding and only rarely hawk for insects.

Behaviour: Black Robins are territorial all year, but especially so in the breeding season, when the male patrols his territory and sings from prominent perches. The main territorial song of the male is a clear, simple and sustained phrase of 5–7 notes. Females sometimes sing brief phrases but never the full song. They also

Reading: Butler, D. & Merton, D. 1992. *The Black Robin: Saving the World's Most Endangered Bird*. Auckland: OUP. Merton, D.V. 1990. *Forest & Bird* 21: 14–19. Merton, D.V. 1993. *NZ J Ecol* 16: 65–68.