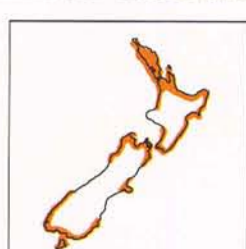


A large diverse group of birds of estuaries, coasts, riverbeds and farmland. Most are long-legged and feed in or near shallow water. Bill shape is varied; short and stubby in those (e.g. dotterels) that peck from the surface, but longer in those that feed in shallow water (e.g. stilts), or probe deeply (e.g. godwits). Flight strong and direct. Often form flocks while roosting or flying, but disperse to feed. Many species seen in NZ breed in the Arctic and arrive in September, with remnants of breeding plumage, and depart in March, often in breeding plumage. Most subadults and a few adults spend the southern winter here.

VARIABLE OYSTERCATCHER (Torea, Toreapango) *Haematopus unicolor* **Uncommon endemic**

48 cm, 725 g. Variable plumage, from black to pied, with continuous gradient between. Long robust red bill and short stubby pink legs. Pied phase like Pied Oystercatcher but larger, bill heavier, and smudgy border on chest; most lack tab in front of folded wing. In flight, white wingbar and rump have smudgy edges, and lower back is black or smudgy. Black phase, commonest south of Taranaki and Gisborne, is pure black. Immature has browner plumage, dusky-red bill and dull legs. Flight call a loud shrill 'kleep'. **Habitat:** Breeds on rocky and sandy coasts, rarely on shores of coastal lakes. Some gather on estuaries in autumn and winter. **Breeding:** Sep–Feb. **[Sp 169]**



OYSTERCATCHERS

7 species worldwide; 3 breed in New Zealand, including 2 endemic species.

Oystercatchers are all black, or black and white, shorebirds with a very long, straight, reddish-orange bill, a squat body and short, thick, pinkish-red legs. They have loud, shrill calls and elaborate 'piping' displays, in which several birds gather and move around with neck stretched, bill pointed downwards and body hunched with wings touching the ground, accompanied by loud, insistent calling.

169. VARIABLE OYSTERCATCHER *Haematopus unicolor* Plate 38

Other names: Torea, Toreapango (black phase), Black Oystercatcher

Size: 48 cm, 725 g

Geographical variation: The distribution of the three colour phases (black, pied and intermediate) varies with latitude: in the northern North Island, 43% are black, 22% are pied and 35% are intermediates; in central New Zealand (39–44°S), 85% are black and 7% pied; and in the southern South Island and Stewart Island, 94% are black and 5% pied.

Distribution: New Zealand only. They are on coasts of the main islands and offshore islands but not the outlying islands. Breeding and wintering distributions are similar, but there is some local movement to estuaries outside the breeding season. In the North Island, they are most abundant along the northeastern coast from North Cape to Mahia Peninsula, and near Wellington, but scarce on the west coast between Manawatu and Auckland. In the South Island, they are common around Tasman and Golden Bays, Marlborough Sounds and Fiordland, but scarce on the east coast between Cloudy Bay and Dunedin. Common on the beaches of Stewart Island and its offshore islands.

Population: c. 4000 birds: North Island 2700 (Northland 1100, Coromandel–Bay of Plenty 800, Gisborne 250, Wellington 150); South Island 1150 (Fiordland 450, Nelson 250); Stewart Island 150.

Conservation: Protected rare endemic. In the early 1900s, they were in serious decline from hunting; however, since they were protected in 1940 they have increased dramatically. This is especially so in the northern North Island, where many nests on sandspits are now also protected from predators and human disturbance. The total population has approximately doubled from c. 2000 birds in the early 1970s.

Breeding: Pairs remain stable from year to year; some occupy their territory all year, but others join small winter flocks or join flocks of Pied Oystercatchers. The nest is a shallow scrape, usually on a sandy beach just above spring-tide level, but also on shingle beaches,

Haematopodidae

Oystercatchers are gregarious, feeding in loose flocks but generally roosting and flying in tight flocks. They are mainly coastal, although Pied Oystercatchers are unusual in that they breed well inland on gravel riverbeds and on farmland. In winter, all species sometimes roost or feed inland on short grass or beside shallow lakes. Their nest is a simple scrape, partially lined with small twigs. Both sexes share incubation and feed the precocial young.

Reading: Baker, A.J. 1973. *Notornis* 20: 128–144.

rock platforms and rarely on lake shores up to 30 km inland (e.g. Lake Wairarapa). Eggs are laid in September–February, mostly November–December; earlier in southern New Zealand. They lay 1–2–3–5 stone to pale olive eggs (59 x 41 mm; 49 g), spotted dark brown. They are laid 2 days apart, mainly in the afternoon. Both sexes incubate, but the female does most during daylight, for 25–28–33 days, starting when the last egg is laid. The downy chicks remain in the nest 1–2 days and then stay in their parents' territory and are solely fed by them for the first 3 weeks. They first fly at 6–7 weeks old, but stay close to their natal territory for at least 2–3 months before dispersing to join winter flocks. They start breeding from 3 years old. The oldest bird recorded lived over 27 years.

Behaviour: Much behaviour is highly ritualised, and many displays are common to other oystercatchers. The most conspicuous breeding display is 'social piping'. Birds mob aerial predators and lead ground predators away from nest or chicks with conspicuous walking, false brooding and feigning wing injury.

Feeding: Diet is mainly molluscs (especially bivalves), worms and crabs, also other small invertebrates and occasionally small fish. They take these mainly from rocky or sandy shores and estuaries, occasionally lake shores and grassland, by surface picking and deep probing. They open bivalves by stabbing between the shells and twisting the bill to part the shells, but some birds hammer through the shell.

In the hand: Females are larger than males, especially for bill length, but measurements overlap: males 82 mm, females 91 mm. First-year birds are distinguished by their dull brown-black upperparts, brownish bill, grey legs and brown eyes, and they retain juvenile primaries through their first year. Second- and third-year birds still have a brownish tinge to their back but develop the pink legs and orange-red eyes of adults.

Reading: Baker, A.J. 1973. *Notornis* 20: 128–144; 330–345. Baker, A.J. 1974. *Notornis* 21: 219–233. Baker, A.J. 1974. *NZ J Mar Fresh Res* 8 211–219. Baker, A.J. 1975. *J Zool (Lond)* 175: 357–390.