



Chatham Island tomtit *Petroica macrocephala* *chathamensis*

13 cm



Male Chatham Island tomtit,
Rangatira.
Photo: Colin Miskelly.

Female Chatham Island
tomtit, Rangatira.
Photo: Colin Miskelly.

CHATHAM ISLANDS ENDEMIC SUBSPECIES,
NATIONALLY ENDANGERED

Other name: Chatham Island tit

Identification

The Chatham Island tomtit is a subspecies of the New Zealand tomtit. It is a small forest bird with a large head and short tail. It is most similar to the South Island tomtit (*P. m. macrocephala*), though slightly larger. The male has a glossy black head with a small white spot above the bill, and black upperparts and upper breast. The underparts are yellowish, getting brighter and more orange towards a sharp dividing line between the yellow and black in the middle of the breast. There is a white wing-bar and sides to the tail. The female has a brown head and upperparts, with a white frontal spot above the bill. The throat, breast and belly are cream, and the wing-bar and sides of the tail are white.



Distribution and ecology

Tomtits are currently restricted to Pitt Island, Rangatira, and Mangere, with a total population of about 1000 birds. On Chatham Island, tomtits declined to low numbers in the southern part of the island as early as 1938, and had disappeared by the mid 1970s. They inhabit mature and regenerating native forest and scrub, where they feed on small



Male Chatham Island tomtit
at nest, Rangatira. Photo:
Alan Munn (DOC).

invertebrates mostly in the mid and upper tiers of the forest. Nests are in tangles of pohuehue vines or in hollow branches or tree cavities, 0.5–8 metres above the ground. Males feed the females while the latter incubate the 2–4 eggs, which are laid in October–December.

Threats and conservation

The deterioration and loss of forest habitat through burning and clearance for farming, and the introduction of browsers are likely to have been key factors in the decline of tomtits. Predation by feral cats and rodents, and possibly possums preying on eggs and chicks, are likely to have contributed to their disappearance on Chatham Island. Predation is thought to be the main factor limiting tomtit population recovery on Chatham and Pitt Islands today.

Chatham Island tomtits are best known for their role as foster parents of black robin eggs and chicks during the 1980s. As part of this programme, all tomtits were removed from Mangere in 1976 to reduce competition with the tiny black robin population. Tomtits were successfully re-introduced to Mangere in 1987–89. Tomtits were also re-introduced to the Tuku Valley, Chatham Island, in 1998, in the hope that the predator control conducted for taiko and parea would have improved the habitat for other forest birds. However, none is known to have survived, suggesting that rat predation may be an important factor preventing the re-establishment of tomtits on Chatham Island. A predator-proof fence constructed on Pitt Island has provided an area of cat-free habitat in which tomtits have thrived.