



Black robin *Petroica traversi* 15 cm

CHATHAM ISLANDS ENDEMIC, NATIONALLY CRITICAL

Other names: kakaruai, Chatham Island black robin



Black robin, Rangatira.
Photo: Colin Miskelly.



Identification

The black robin is a small songbird with completely black plumage, becoming blackish-brown as the feathers wear. It has a short fine, black bill, long thin dark legs and an upright stance. Sexes are alike although the female is slightly smaller. Black robins feed mostly on the forest floor. Their call is a high-pitched single note, and the male song is a clear simple phrase of 5-7 notes. It most closely resembles the Snares Island black tomtit (*P. macrocephala dannefaerdii*), but its behaviour shows its relationship to the New Zealand robin (*P. australis*).

Distribution and ecology

Black robins were originally present on Mangere, Tapuaenuku, Chatham and Pitt Islands. There are no historical records of the species' presence on Rangatira, although it is likely that they did occur there. By 1872, when the species was first encountered by European observers, it had already disappeared from Chatham Island. For many years the world population of black robins was confined to Tapuaenuku, a tiny Maori-owned island, protected by extremely tall cliffs.



Top: Black robin nest with three eggs, Rangatira, January 2000.
Above: Fourteen-day-old black robin chicks in a nest box, Rangatira, January 1987.
Photos: Don Merton (DOC).

and feathers, usually in a tree cavity, hollow branch or rotten stump. The 1-3 eggs are laid in October-November, and typically a single brood is reared. The female does all the incubating, although she is fed by the male, and both parents feed the chicks.

Threats and conservation

Mammalian predators, particularly rodents and feral cats, are likely to have been the main cause of the black robin's decline. Cats exterminated the black robin on Mangere by about 1900. Habitat loss was also likely to have been important. Large areas of forest habitat on the main islands were destroyed by fire and conversion to farmland before the end of the 1800s. Introduced browsers accelerated the degradation of bush remnants.

Current threats to black robin on Rangatira and Mangere include the risk of invasion by introduced predators or disease, competition from avian competitors such as starlings, and habitat loss through fire. Hybridisation between black robins and Chatham Island tomtits was



Juvenile black robin, Rangatira.
Photo: Don Merton.

recorded on a number of occasions, but in all instances involved black robins that were reared by tomtits; none of these foster-reared birds or hybrids remains in the population.

The rescue of the black robin from its last tiny refuge on Tapuaenuku and the subsequent recovery of the population is now a celebrated episode in New Zealand conservation

history. Efforts to save the black robin from extinction began in the late 1970s, when the tiny population (down to seven birds) was moved from Tapuaenuku, where the small forest patch they inhabited was deteriorating, to Mangere. On Mangere, an intensive programme of manipulating black robin breeding attempts to boost productivity was initiated. This involved using firstly warblers and then, on Rangatira, tomtits as foster parents, so that the robins could be induced to produce multiple clutches of eggs each season. The success of this programme, and particularly the cooperation of the then only remaining productive female 'Old Blue', meant that by 1983 a second population could be started on Rangatira.

When black robin numbers reached 80 in 1989, the decision was made to discontinue the intensive nest manipulation programme, to see if the population would increase on its own. Numbers continued to increase, and by 1998 it was thought large enough (over 200 birds) for a less intensive monitoring programme to be initiated.

The recovery programme for black robins aims to establish a third population in the Chatham Islands. To this end, a predator-proof fence has been constructed around 40 ha of regenerating bush on Pitt Island. A first transfer of 14 birds to this site took place in September 2002. Unfortunately none of these birds established at the site. A further 20 juveniles were released in March 2004.

On Rangatira and Mangere, strict quarantine measures are applied to protect black robins from exposure to mammalian predators, and there is an ongoing planting programme on Mangere to increase the area of forest available for the robins. With further regeneration, both Rangatira and Mangere will be able to support greater numbers of robins than they do currently.