

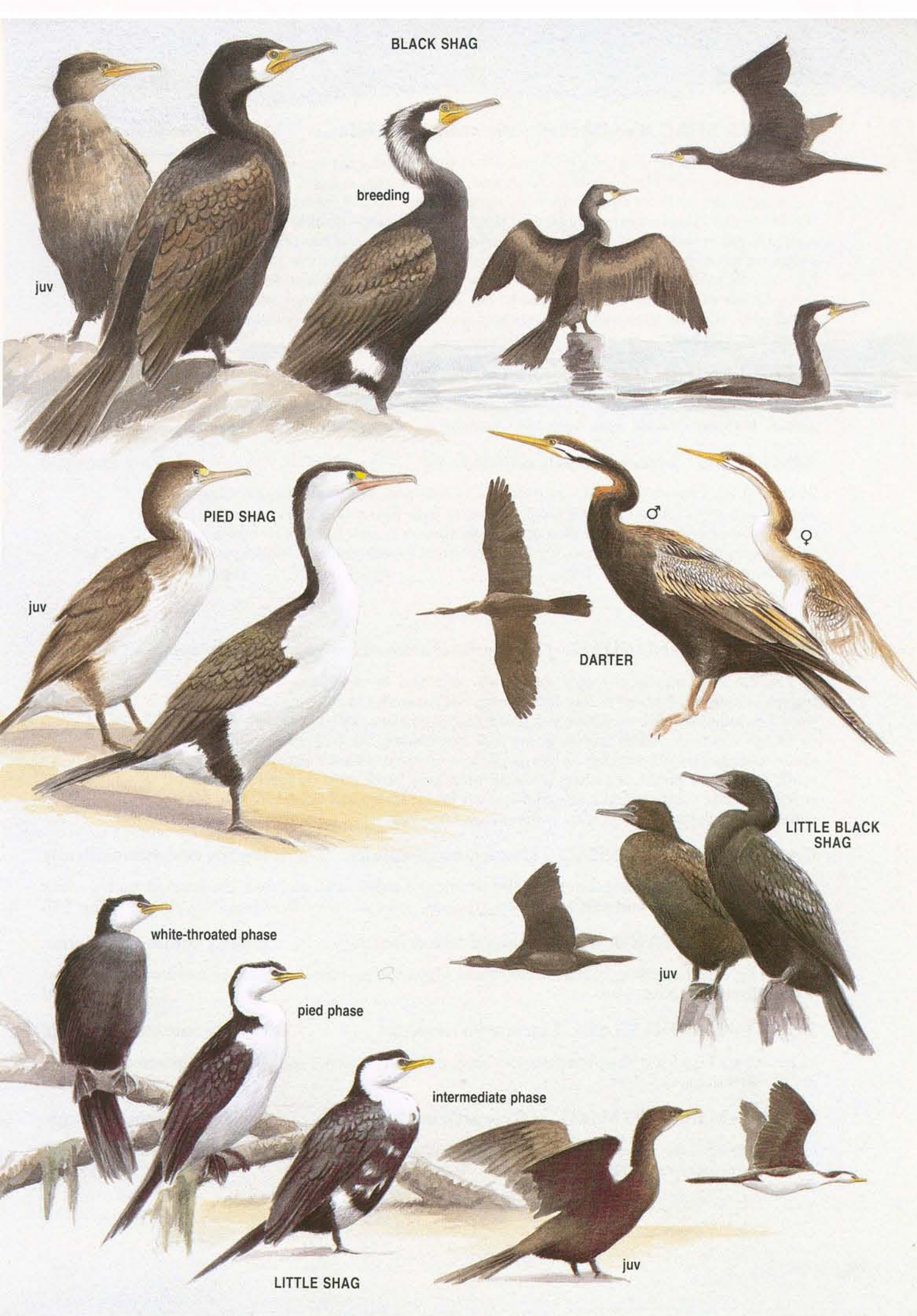
Shags are medium to large aquatic birds. Most are all black, or black above and white below. Bill long, strongly hooked at the tip. Upright posture when perched. Short legs; feet are fully webbed. Many have brightly coloured facial skin when breeding. Sexes alike. In flight, wings short and broad, and neck is extended. Swim with head held uptilted and body low in the water.

LITTLE BLACK SHAG *Phalacrocorax sulcirostris*

Locally common native

61 cm, 800 g. Small elegant shag. Wholly black with green gloss, *dark-edged feathers give a scalloped effect on back*. Long, slender lead-grey bill; dark facial skin; eye green; feet black. Immature similar but brownish. Tail short compared with that of Little Shag. Gregarious, often feeding as a co-ordinated pack and flying in V-formation low to the water. **Habitat:** Lakes, estuaries and harbours. Common in North I but rare in South I. **Breeding:** Nov–Apr.

[Sp 93]



SHAGS

Phalacrocoracidae

33 species worldwide in freshwater and marine habitats; 12 species breed in the New Zealand region, including 8 endemic species.

longest, and a web connects the inner toe with the long hind toe. In the breeding season, bare skin on the face becomes brightly coloured and contrasts with the eye and bill.

In New Zealand, all members of the Phalacrocoracidae are called shags, whereas elsewhere the term 'cormorant' is used for members of the genus *Phalacrocorax*. Foot colour varies between the three genera in New Zealand: black in the mainly freshwater *Phalacrocorax*, pink in the marine *Leucocarbo*, and yellow in the marine *Stictocarbo*.

Shags sometimes feed in flocks, but they typically roost in flocks and breed in colonies on cliffs or rocky islets, or in trees overhanging water, sometimes together with other shags. They have an elaborate series of ritualised courtship displays at or near the nest, a bulky platform made of sticks or seaweed. Their eggs have a chalky encrustation on the surface. Both sexes share incubation. The chicks are naked at hatching but soon develop down. Both parents regurgitate food for the chicks. If a predator approaches, chicks in tree nests overhanging water will jump well before they can fly, but they are adept at climbing back up to the nest.

Shags are medium to large, long-necked aquatic birds with a stiff, wedge-shaped tail, and moderately short, rounded wings, which black-footed shags hold out to dry when perched. They feed by diving from the water surface to catch fish and crustacea with their long hooked bill. They use their webbed feet to swim underwater. The outermost toe is

93. LITTLE BLACK SHAG *Phalacrocorax sulcirostris*

Plate 23

Other name: Little Black Cormorant
Size: 61 cm, 800 g
Distribution: Breed in Australasia east of Borneo and Java, in New Caledonia and the North Island of New Zealand, with a few large colonies in the Auckland, Waikato, Rotorua Lakes, Lake Taupo, Hawke's Bay and Lake Wairarapa wetlands. They disperse widely in autumn after breeding, with an influx of birds into coastal areas around Northland and Auckland and into Wellington Harbour. A few regularly winter in the South Island, as far south as Southland. Fledglings banded at Lake Rotorua have been recovered in the Hauraki Gulf and from Wellington.
Population: Widespread and moderately common (1000–5000 pairs), especially in the North Island. A rare visitor to the South Island. Colonies of 300+ pairs have been recorded at Lakes Whangape (Waikato), Rotorua and Taupo, but these normally last only a few years before the birds shift elsewhere. The number of Little Black Shags seems to be increasing, with a marked increase in numbers seen in winter in the southern North Island

and in the South Island since about 1980.
Conservation: Protected native. Little Black Shags are sometimes illegally persecuted by fishermen who regard them as competitors for fish, and some birds are caught accidentally in fishing nets. Shags are now known to have a minimal impact on fish stocks, and few are now shot; this may have contributed to the recent increase in numbers of Little Black Shags.
Breeding: Nest in large colonies, sometimes together with other shags, especially Little Shags. Colonies are commonly in willows overhanging fresh water, but sometimes nests are constructed on the ground on small islands. The nest is usually a platform of sticks about 30 cm in diameter. Laying is mostly in November–December, but some autumn nesting has been recorded. They lay 2–4–5 pale bluish-green eggs (48 x 32 mm) 2 days apart. No information is available on incubation or fledging periods. In New Zealand, the oldest Little Black Shag lived at least 9 years.
Behaviour: Feed in flocks of 10–150 birds and

work as a group to herd a shoal of fish. They often roost in large groups on logs, on piers, on rocks and in trees. They are silent away from their colonies, but at the nest they are noisy, making a variety of harsh croaks and whistles.

whitebait are probably the main marine species taken, judging by the flocking behaviour of birds in estuaries and sheltered harbours. Most fish are taken close to the surface, and dive times are generally 5–10 seconds. Rest times between dives last only 2–3 seconds.

Feeding: Diet is mainly small fish and freshwater crayfish. The main inland prey are smelt, bullies and goldfish, and smelt and

Reading: Potts, K.J. 1977. *Wildlife – A Review* 8: 34–38.