



## Chatham Island mollymawk

*Thalassarche eremita*

90 cm

CHATHAM ISLANDS ENDEMIC, SERIOUS DECLINE

**Other name:** Chatham albatross

### Identification

The Chatham Island mollymawk is now regarded as a full species; formerly it was regarded as a subspecies of shy albatross (*T. cauta*). It is a medium-sized, dark mollymawk (wingspan 2.2 metres) with a dark grey head and back, and white breast, belly and rump. The upper surface of the wings and the tail are a darker grey, and the wings are white underneath, with narrow black borders. The bill is bright orange-yellow with a dark spot at the tip of the lower mandible. Juveniles

have more extensive grey plumage, and a grey bill with black tips on both mandibles.

### Distribution and ecology

The Pyramid (south of Pitt Island) is the only confirmed breeding site of the Chatham Island mollymawk. A few birds have been seen ashore on the Snares Islands (one egg recorded, which failed to hatch) and at Albatross Island off Tasmania. There are estimated to be about 4500 breeding pairs on The Pyramid each year, but the low survival rate of adult Chatham Island mollymawks indicates that the total population is in decline.

Chatham Island mollymawks are rarely seen near the coasts of

Chatham Island mollymawk with chick, The Pyramid, December 2001.

Photo: Paul Scofield.



Chatham Island mollymawk colony, The Pyramid, December 2001.  
Photo: Paul Scofield

Chatham and Pitt Islands, apparently foraging to the east, south and west of the islands. They spend the winter off the coasts of Chile and Peru, returning to New Zealand waters for the breeding season. Little is known regarding the movement of young birds, between fledging and returning to the breeding colony as adults, but they may remain off the west coast of South America. Chatham Island mollymawks breed annually from September to April; like all albatrosses and petrels they lay a single egg. Nests are a shallow cup on a small pedestal of soil, rock chips, guano and vegetation. In dry, sheltered sites, nest pedestals can last for many years and reach a height of up to 1.5 metres.

### Threats and conservation

Chatham Island mollymawks have been caught as by-catch in a wide variety of fisheries, both in New Zealand waters and off the coasts of Chile and Peru. Chicks have been harvested in large numbers in the past. Harvest is now illegal; however, there is anecdotal evidence that small numbers of chicks continue to be taken sporadically. The loss of soil and drying of the island as a result of adverse weather can cause egg mortality for Chatham Island mollymawks, as has been observed with northern royal albatross. Some nest sites near the shore have been lost to encroaching fur seals.

Other than legal protection of the species, no specific conservation actions have been taken for Chatham Island mollymawk. During the 1970s, work was undertaken to estimate the size of the population and aspects of the species' breeding biology. Further research has been conducted during the 1990s to 2003 to determine productivity estimates, age at



first breeding, and more accurate population estimates. Satellite transmitters have been used to monitor birds' movements at sea.

Chatham Island mollymawk chick close to fledging, The Pyramid, February 1993.  
Photo: Graeme Taylor.