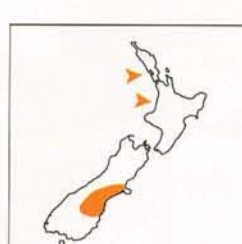


A large diverse group of birds of estuaries, coasts, riverbeds and farmland. Most are long-legged and feed in or near shallow water. Bill shape is varied; short and stubby in those (e.g. dotterels) that peck from the surface, but longer in those that feed in shallow water (e.g. stilts), or probe deeply (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.

**BLACK STILT (Kaki)** *Himantopus novaeseelandiae*

Rare endemic

40 cm, 220 g. Pure adults entirely black with a greenish gloss on upper surface. Very long pinkish-red legs, very long fine black bill, red eye. Juvenile has white on head, neck and breast, with black patch around eye and grey wash on back of neck. Wings, belly, flanks and undertail black. Full black plumage acquired over the first year, but throughout the bill is longer than in Pied Stilt and the legs slightly shorter. Naturally hybridises with Pied Stilt; adult hybrids are very variable, but longer bill and shorter legs are apparent in darker birds. Unlike juvenile Black Stilt, hybrid adults have some solid black on the breast. **Habitat:** Breeds on riverbeds, lake margins and ponds of Mackenzie Basin, inland South Canterbury. After breeding, most move to river deltas of major lakes in the Mackenzie Basin, but some move to estuaries of eastern South I and western North I. **Breeding:** Sep–Jan. [Sp 172]



**STILTS and AVOCETS**

**Recurvirostridae**

Of 7 species, 2 breed in New Zealand and a third may have bred in the nineteenth century.

females, with complex lamellae which they use to sift out tiny food particles. Sexes are alike, but males have longer legs. Most species have a pattern of black above and white below. Webbing between the front three toes is much reduced in stilts. Although having long legs, which trail behind the short, square tail in flight, they are slim and graceful. Adult plumage is gained in their first or second year; they first breed at 2–3 years.

These are medium-sized waders with long, slender bills, necks and especially legs, which suit their wading up to the belly to feed in shallow fresh, salt or brackish water. Stilts have a fine, almost straight bill. Avocets have a fine, upturned bill, more sharply turned in

**172. BLACK STILT** *Himantopus novaeseelandiae*

Plate 39

**Other name:** Kaki  
**Size:** 40 cm, 220 g  
**Distribution:** New Zealand only. In the nineteenth century, Black Stilts bred on the braided shingle riverbeds and associated wetlands of the lower North Island and the whole South Island (except Fiordland) on both sides of the Southern Alps. In the 1930s and 1940s, they were still common in lowland South Canterbury, Central Otago and the Mackenzie Basin. They have declined drastically, and since about 1960 breeding has been confined to the Mackenzie Basin. They now breed only in the upper Waitaki system from the Godley and Macaulay Rivers in the north to the Cass, Tasman, Tekapo, Ohau, Hopkins, Dobson and Ahuriri Rivers in the centre and south. After nesting, most move to ponds or lakes before wintering on the nearby river deltas around major lakes, but a few migrate north to Kawhia and Kaipara Harbours. Birds paired with Pied Stilts or with strongly Pied hybrids sometimes follow their mates to northern North Island estuaries, leaving in January and returning in July at the earliest.  
**Population:** c. 160 birds in 2004: 72 adults in

the wild and 47 others held in captivity at Twizel.  
**Conservation:** Protected endangered endemic. The decline of Black Stilts has been from predation by introduced mammals, loss of habitat, and hybridisation with Pied Stilts. The main predators, feral cats and ferrets, may be short of their main food, the rabbit, when Black Stilts start nesting in August. They breed alone on the banks of small streams and side braids of major rivers, but also on islands or swamps. Unlike Pied Stilts, they do not have the mutual protection of nesting in colonies, they have lost some of their distraction displays, and their fledging period is a long c. 40 days, cf. the Pied Stilt's 30–37 days. Habitat was lost to hydroelectric development, to the drainage of swamps and to the spread on riverbeds of introduced plants such as willows and lupins.  
 As Black Stilts declined, they became so widely separated that often not enough Black Stilts were on a river, and as Pied Stilts became abundant they interbred, resulting in hybrids. Management aims to control predation, partly by trapping round each Black Stilt nest, partly by maintaining predator-free exclosures;

incubating eggs and hand-rearing about 30 chicks each year and passing them to Black Stilt adults in the wild so that they stay in the Mackenzie Basin for the winter and mate with other Black Stilts; and restoring habitat by removing exotic plants from waterways.  
**Breeding:** Nest as solitary pairs in braided shingle rivers and nearby wetlands such as sidestreams, swamps, tarns and ponds. They arrive on territory in July or August and select a nest site on stable shingle, usually on islands or the banks of a river. Both sexes build the nest. Eggs are laid in September–December. They lay 3–4–5 eggs (45 x 32 mm), greenish with dark brown or black blotches and streaks. Incubation starts after the third or fourth egg is laid. Both sexes incubate for 24–25–27 days. The fledging period is 30–40–55 days. They can breed at 2 years old, but most breed first when 3 years old. The oldest bird known in

the wild lived over 19 years.  
**Behaviour:** Less gregarious than Pied Stilts. They make a loud, monotonous yapping, like that of Pied Stilts but higher-pitched.  
**Feeding:** Insectivorous, taking mostly aquatic invertebrates, especially mayflies. Other foods of some importance are several kinds of caddisfly, molluscs, fish, midges and water-boatmen. They catch their prey by pecking at them in the water column, probing beneath shingle or rocks or, in mud, scything sideways by feel only, in the manner of avocets. Favourite feeding places are the riffles of braided rivers.  
**Reading:** Pierce, R. 1986. *Black Stilt*. Wellington: John McIndoe & NZ Wildlife Service. Reed, C.E.M. 1986. Unpubl MSc thesis, Massey Univ. Reed, C.E.M. et al. 1993. *Black Stilt Recovery Plan*. Wellington: DoC.