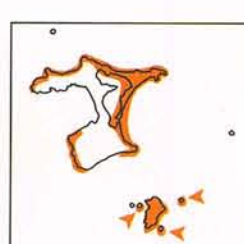


A large diverse group of birds of estuaries, coasts, riverbeds and farmland. Most are long-legged and feed in or near shallow water. Bill shape is varied; short and stubby in those (e.g. dotterels) that peck from the surface, but longer in those that feed in shallow water (e.g. stilts), or probe deeply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

CHATHAM ISLAND OYSTERCATCHER *Haematopus chathamensis* **Rare endemic**

48 cm, 600 g. Like pied phase Variable Oystercatcher in having a slightly smudgy border on chest, but *shorter bill and thicker legs and feet*. **Habitat:** Rocky and sandy coasts of Chatham Is. **Breeding:** Oct–Mar. [Sp 170]



OYSTERCATCHERS

7 species worldwide; 3 breed in New Zealand, including 2 endemic species.

Oystercatchers are all black, or black and white, shorebirds with a very long, straight, reddish-orange bill, a squat body and short, thick, pinkish-red legs. They have loud, shrill calls and elaborate 'piping' displays, in which several birds gather and move around with neck stretched, bill pointed downwards and body hunched with wings touching the ground, accompanied by loud, insistent calling.

Haematopodidae

Oystercatchers are gregarious, feeding in loose flocks but generally roosting and flying in tight flocks. They are mainly coastal, although Pied Oystercatchers are unusual in that they breed well inland on gravel riverbeds and on farmland. In winter, all species sometimes roost or feed inland on short grass or beside shallow lakes. Their nest is a simple scrape, partially lined with small twigs. Both sexes share incubation and feed the precocial young.

Reading: Baker, A.J. 1973. *Notornis* 20: 128–144.

170. CHATHAM ISLAND OYSTERCATCHER

Haematopus chathamensis **Plate 38**

Size: 48 cm, 600 g
Distribution: Confined to the Chatham Islands. Most are widely scattered on the coast of Chatham and Pitt Islands, and on wave platforms of South East and Mangere Islands and the Star Keys. Breeding and wintering distributions are similar, but some local movement of juveniles between islands has been noted, and some pairs breeding on South East Island regularly feed 2 km away on Pitt Island.
Population: c. 300 birds in 2004. Of 84 known or likely breeding pairs, 64 were on Chatham Island, 13 on Pitt Island, 4 on South East Island and 3 on Mangere Island.
Conservation: Protected endangered endemic. In the 1930s, the Chatham Island Oystercatcher was widely distributed but scarce. Numbers have increased spectacularly since 1970, when the population was estimated at c. 50 birds. The main increase has been in the northern part of Chatham Island, where nests have been protected from predators and storm surges since the early 1990s. The population on South East Island has, however, declined from 13 pairs in 1978 to 8 pairs in 1989 and to just 4 pairs in 2004.
Breeding: Most pairs occupy their territory all year, but juveniles and subadults form small flocks or settle alone on a vacant section of coast. The nest is a shallow scrape, usually on a sandy beach just above spring-tide level, or among rocks above the shoreline. On offshore islands, nests are usually well away from centres of Brown Skua territories and are often under the cover of small bushes or rock overhangs. Eggs are laid in October–February, mostly November–December. They lay 1–2–3 olive-grey eggs (57 x 40 mm; 46 g), spotted dark brown. They are laid 2 days apart. Both sexes incubate, but the female does most during daylight, for about 25 days.

The downy chicks remain in the nest 1–2 days and are then led away by their parents; they continue to be brooded at least during the first week. They first fly at c. 7 weeks old but stay close to their natal territory for several months before dispersing. They start breeding from 3 years old, but most start when 5–6. Mean life expectancy is 7.7 years; the oldest bird lived over 19 years.

Behaviour: Much behaviour is highly ritualised, and many displays are common to other oystercatchers. The most conspicuous breeding display is 'social piping'. Birds mob aerial predators, including Brown Skuas, and lead ground predators away from nest or chicks with conspicuous walking, false brooding and feigning wing injury.

Feeding: Diet is mainly molluscs and marine worms, supplemented with other small invertebrates. They take these mainly from rocky shores (especially from small pools on wave platforms and from algal mats) or sandy shores by surface picking and deep probing. They open bivalves by stabbing between the shells and twisting the bill to part the shells, but some birds hammer through the shell. Limpets and chitons are struck vertical blows, prised off rocks and eaten whole.

In the hand: Females are larger than males, especially for bill length, but measurements overlap slightly: males 68 mm, females 77 mm. First-year birds are distinguished by their dull brown-black upperparts, pinkish-brown bill, grey legs and brown eyes, and they retain juvenile primaries through their first year. Second- and third-year birds still have a brownish tinge to their back but develop the pink legs and orange-red eyes of adults.

Reading: Baker, A.J. 1973. *Notornis* 20: 128–144. Baker, A.J. 1974. *Notornis* 21: 219–233. Baker, A.J. 1974. *NZ J Mar Fresh Res* 8: 211–219. Baker, A.J. 1975. *J Zool (Lond)* 175: 357–390. Schmechel, F. & O'Connor, S. 1999. *Notornis* 46: 155–165.