

CHAMBERS, S. 2009.

Birds of New Zealand - Locality Guide. 3rd edn.

Arun Books, Orewa, New Zealand.

Black stilt: pp 149-151.



BLACK STILT

Family Recurvirostridae

Species *Himantopus novaezelandiae*

Common names Black Stilt, Kaki

Status Endemic

Abundance Rare

Size 400 mm (cf sparrow 145 mm, Pied Stilt 380 mm)

Discussion The Black Stilt is an endangered New Zealand species. Its future will be determined by a breeding programme conducted both in captivity and in the wild. So far captive birds have bred successfully.

Historical Both the Black Stilt and Pied Stilt escaped notice during Cook's early explorations of New Zealand. Black Stilts were eventually collected in 1840 (Fleming 1982) but there were no records of Pied Stilts until the 1870s. This

suggests that Black Stilts were the original stilt inhabitant of New Zealand with Pied Stilts coming later, probably from Australia.

Differences in nesting habits of Black and Pied Stilts The increase in Pied Stilt numbers has paralleled the decline of the Black Stilt, even though Black Stilt and Pied Stilt occupy different nesting niches, with Black Stilt preferring shingle river-beds and Pied Stilt swamp verges, wetlands and coastal areas. Reasons for this decline have not been clearly established although a reduction in breeding habitat, plus predation by mustelids, rats and cats, on a species adapted to a predator-free environment, with associated slower maturing fledglings, has had something to do with it. Current interbreeding between Black Stilts and Pied Stilts is also suggested as another cause.

Note on melanism. Fleming (1982) noted that the Black Stilt had “followed the tendency to melanism common among New Zealand species (New Zealand shags, oystercatchers, wekas, robins, tits and fantails)”. He suggested this had come about because “a species in a predator-free land could relax the need for countershading or disruptive plumage patterns”.

Classification. Some authorities have considered the Black Stilt a race of the genus *Himantopus* and have not given it separate species status. However, Pierce (1984), after a lengthy study, discovered that Black Stilts differed from Pied Stilt in the following ways -

- They possessed longer and broader bills. This, he determined, increased their feeding range allowing them to probe under stones for aquatic insects on dry land rather than having to maintain a strictly aquatic, shoreline, feeding station.
- They possessed a shorter tarsus indicating less reliance on water wading for sustenance.
- They followed a different migration pattern, most Black Stilts wintering in the upper Waitaki River basin while the hybrids and peds (plus a few blacks) tended to move north to Kawhia and Manukau.
- They returned to their breeding grounds earlier than Pied Stilts.
- They chose different nesting sites, Pied Stilts preferring swamp verges and wetlands, while Black Stilts the shingle embankments in the wide rivers preferably with water surrounding them.
- They preferred to mate with Black Stilts and if Black Stilts were not available they chose a hybrid as second preference.
- Their young had a longer fledgling stage by approximately ten days.
- They had different feeding capabilities in late winter, the Black Stilt being capable of probing beneath stones for aquatic invertebrates, a method which allowed it to overcome cold water temperatures which otherwise would have disallowed feeding. The Pied Stilt did not feed in this manner, a fact which limited the date of its return to the high country from the

winter migration.

- They were less defensive on the nesting site lacking the elaborate distraction antics of the Pied Stilt, a factor which supports an ancient evolution in a predator-free environment.

Conclusion From all this evidence Pierce concluded that the Black Stilt should retain its full species status.

Description – adult bird

Upper and underparts Black. **Legs** Red. **Bill** Black.

Description – immature

Upperparts White. **Wings** Black. **Underparts** White.

Note Pierce (1984), observed the progression of young Black Stilts from the nestling stage to third summer and recorded a succession of steps by which the young birds progressed from being black-winged only, to black flanked, to smudgy breasted, to flecked with grey and finally to becoming totally black.

Conspicuous feature

- The all black colouring is distinctive.

Call A yapping, yep yep yep sound, similar to the Pied Stilt.

Nest A solitary breeder which makes a nest of grass and soft twigs usually on a riverbed. Up to 4 greenish, brown-blotched eggs are laid.

Where to find – North Island

King Country – Kawhia Harbour usually has a flock of between ten and fifteen birds of both pure Black Stilts and hybrids every year in winter. Chance views may be had from harbour verges near Kawhia town or from harbour glimpses on the Hauturu road which leaves the Kawhia road at Oparau. A boat is really required to see this bird as they roost on a low sand-bank island in the harbour at high tides. P. 313.

Where to find – South Island

South Canterbury – Cass River entered from the Lake McGregor Road. P. 354.

South Canterbury – South from Twizel on Highway 8 at the Ohau River. P. 355.

South Canterbury – Lake Benmore. P. 355.

South Canterbury – Benmore Tarn at Clearburn. P. 355.

South Canterbury – Ahuriri River south from Omarama on Highway 8. P. 355.

Captive birds To see captive birds visit –

- Otorohanga Zoological Society Gardens in Otorohanga. P. 312.
- Mount Bruce National Wildlife Centre in the Wairarapa. P. 333.
- Twizel Black Stilt Research Centre. P. 355.