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à la Tōrea Pango

An exhibition in collaboration with Laree Payne Gallery, Hamilton

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The variable oystercatcher/tōrea pango is a familiar, stocky coastal bird with a long, bright orange bill, found around much of New Zealand. They are often seen in pairs probing busily for shellfish along beaches or in estuaries. Tōrea pango are long-lived, with some birds reaching 30+ years of age.

The existence of different colour morphs (black, intermediate or 'smudgy', and pied) caused early confusion, and they were variously thought to be different species, forms, or hybrids. This confusion was compounded by a cline in morphs, with the proportion of all-black birds increasing from north to south.

Identification

Tōrea pango are large, heavily-built shorebirds. Adults have black upperparts, their underparts vary from all black, through a range of 'smudgy' intermediate states to white. They have a conspicuous, long bright orange bill (longer in females), and stout coral-pink legs. The iris is red and eye-ring orange. Downy chicks occur in two colour morphs; they have a black bill, pale-mid grey upper parts with black markings, and either grey or off-white underparts. First-year birds have a dark tip to the bill, browner dorsal plumage, and grey legs.

Voice: tōrea pango are very vocal; loud piping is used in territorial interactions when alarmed, and they have a loud flight call similar to other oystercatchers. Chicks are warned of danger with a sharp, loud 'chip' or 'click'.

Habitat

Tōrea pango breed most commonly on sandy beaches, sand spits, and in dunes, but will use a wide variety of coastal habitat types, including shell banks, rocky shorelines, and less often gravel beaches. They forage in all these areas and also on inter-tidal mudflats in estuaries, and on rock platforms. Tōrea pango are not usually seen far from the coast, but will forage in paddocks, and occasionally nest a short distance inland, usually on mown or grazed grassy areas or bare ground. A very few nest around lakes or a short distance up braided rivers.

Breeding

Variable oystercatchers breed in monogamous pairs, and defend territories vigorously against neighbours. Nests are normally simple scrapes in the sand, often with a marker of driftwood, vegetation, or flotsam. The 2-3 eggs are usually laid from October onwards (rarely September), and replaced if lost. Incubation is shared and takes about 28 days. Chicks fly at 6-7 weeks-old, and late chicks may not fledge until March. Chicks are vigorously defended by both parents, often well after fledging. In Northland and Auckland, most birds do not breed until they are 5 years or older.

Behaviour and ecology

Tōrea pango are often highly aggressive towards people close to nests or chicks, dive-bombing (sometimes making contact) and screeching. They also undertake distraction displays on the ground in defence of eggs and chicks.

Unlike most shorebirds, tōrea pango feed their young. Small chicks often remain hidden under vegetation, rocks, etc, with parents bringing food; this probably reduces the risk of predation by gulls and harriers. As chicks grow, they gradually find more of their own food, but are often seen begging from parents well after fledging. Sibling rivalry is common; when hatching is asynchronous, there is often large variation in size of the chicks within a brood. Adults commonly false-brood to conceal the location of nest or chicks.

New Zealand status: Endemic

Conservation status: Recovering

Threats: Predation

Mokopōpaki