

Biodiversity



Variable oystercatcher (*Haematopus unicolor*)

Number 18

DESCRIPTION

The variable oystercatcher is an endangered, endemic species in New Zealand. They are large heavily-built shore birds, found on sandy beaches, sandspits or feeding in tidal estuaries. Adults have black upper parts and their under parts vary from all black through a range of black and white markings. They have a conspicuous long bright orange bill (longer in females), and stout, coral-pink legs. They are 47cm to 49cm long and weigh up to 720g.

DISTRIBUTION, BREEDING AND FEEDING

The variable oystercatcher is found around most of the New Zealand coastline including Stewart Island. However, they occur in lower densities on the west coast of the North and South Islands. Variable oystercatchers lay two to three eggs a year and often look after their young even after they have fledged. Both parents will incubate and care for their chicks, with the breeding season running from September to March. Adults will commonly produce a false brood to camouflage their eggs or chicks. They eat a range of invertebrates, including mussels and cockles.

VARIABLE OYSTERCATCHER IN TARANAKI

In Taranaki, variable oystercatchers are often seen in pairs, probing busily for shellfish along beaches or in estuaries. They are very vocal and often heard calling when in flight, defending their territories or alarmed.



Variable oystercatchers at Mimi Estuary

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

- Do not ride cars, bikes or motorbikes above the high tide mark on beaches where variable oystercatcher live.
- During the breeding season, keep your dogs on a leash or away from the beaches.
- Obey signs regarding nesting birds and do not go inside fenced-off areas.
- Report sightings to the Taranaki Regional Council.



CONSERVATION

The variable oystercatcher is a threatened species listed as 'at risk, recovering'.

THREATS

Predators such as rats, cats, hedgehogs, stoats and dogs can reduce populations.

Their habitat is in serious decline and populations have been driven away from busy beaches.

The variable oystercatcher nests in the high tide zone, so their nests can be washed away, run over by motorbikes or trodden on by people.

QUICK FACTS

- Chicks can fly at six-seven weeks of age.
- They are long-lived and can reach 30 or more years old.
- They are territorial and will vigorously defend their area from neighbours.
- They first breed when they are four to six years old.