



A Little About Three Native Birds On The Chatham Islands

The Black Robin



Figure 1 Black Robin

There are only 2 islands among all of the islands that make up the Chatham Islands where you can still see the Black Robin and they are both in the south-eastern area of the group – Mangere Island and Rangatira Island. With the introduction of rats and cats that came with the ships and newcomers after the Moriori settled, the numbers of birds that suffered the attacks by these predators dwindled to nearly extinction. Any disease is lethal to them as well because all Black Robins carry the same DNA.

And should there be an accidental introduction of rats, cats or mice onto these two remaining islands, then the battle against extinction would be at its highest.



Figure 2 Old Blue

In 1972 only eighteen birds were found living on Little Mangere Island and by 1976 this population had been drastically reduced to a mere seven. Mangere Island seemed the safest bet for their future; therefore these seven birds were very carefully transported to the safety of the new 120,000 trees that had been planted to give them better cover and longer-life chances of survival. Even with this much improved shelter though, by 1980 two more birds were missing presumed dead, and none of the remaining five had produced any offspring even though there was one mating pair included among them. The wildlife officers were beside themselves with despair – what to do? What to do?

It was decided that with this last breeding pair – a female called Old Blue and a male called Old Yellow, a new programme was hatched into being. With the help of the Chatham Island Tits, a fostering programme was introduced to try to save the existence of the Black Robin. By 2013 a population of 250 Black Robins was noted to the joy of all concerned throughout the world.

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Encouraged by the results, wildlife officers did their best to begin breeding the Black Robin on Pitt Island this time in a fenced-in area, however, no matter what they tried, their attempts were unsuccessful. Mice were also on the island by this time and so the competition for food between the two species would probably have been responsible for its failure.

The name Old Blue is world renowned in the world of bird lovers, because all descendants have come from her, being the last breeding female and what's more, she actually lived to the astonishing age of fourteen years. The success of the fostering programme is now widely studied and being used to help create other success stories for endangered bird species not only here in New Zealand but all around the world.

Hope remains for all!

A Little About The Chatham Island Pigeon or Parea

Here we have a very large pigeon with colours that are unique to this beautiful bird living in the southern Chatham Island in amongst the extensive forests.



Figure 3 Chatham Island Pigeon

The Chatham Island Pigeon or otherwise known among the Maori as the Parea is closely related to its cousin the Kereru. We have several of them that perch in the tops of trees here in our camp so we have become quite accustomed to seeing them at various times during the year. The Chatham Island Pigeon is so named as it is endemic to the Chatham Islands; however, their appearance is not as widely seen as their cousin who spoils us here in Picton on a regular basis. Once the Parea do decide to perch though, usually as individuals, they can be photographed and talked to, because they do not mind you approaching closely to get a good view of them.

They love clover leaves, which are a ground cover food, and can often be seen along the sides of the road feeding, more especially during spring season. Feral cats are their arch enemy, however, since the 1990's DOC has provided special care in their pest control programmes to keep these birds as safe as possible to guard against extinction.

The Chatham Island Pigeon or Parea are beautiful in their plumage as described here:

“The head, neck and upper breast of Parea are blackish blue with a faint green and blue iridescence; the mantle and wing coverts are maroon with maroon iridescence. The rump and tail coverts are pale grey with a faint green wash, contrasting with the darker back and wing coverts. The exposed portions of the flight feathers are mainly grey. The upper surfaces of the tail feathers are black, and the lower breast and belly are white. Strikingly, the bill is red with a robust orange tip, and the legs and eyes crimson. Fledglings and juveniles have duller plumage, and often the white breast is smudgy white-grey, with the demarcation between black-blue and white feathering being ragged, and there may be a narrow border of cinnamon wash over the upper white breast feathers. “

The Parea are not known to make their presence felt by sound, as they seem to prefer silence wherever you see them. However in saying that, they do make low ‘oos’ noises and of course as with any species be it bird, animal or fish, they have their own alarm system which in their case become longer ‘ooooos’ rising and lowering in volume depending on their situation at the time. The little ones give out very low volume squeaks

as their way of communicating with the parent who is about to feed them.



Figure 4 Kereru

Kereru are not known on the Islands, however, it is agreed that an ancestor has to have made the long trip of 800 km over the water from New Zealand to the Chatham Islands in order for the Parea to exist in all of its beauty today. Pitt Island has known the Parea in the past, however, the main population of them is centred around the southern areas of Chatham Island itself mainly in the patches of forest that still remain, although Te Whanga Lagoon along the western shoreline does enjoy their appearance at times as well. They can also be seen in scrub-type situations next to stock pasture.

In 1989 there were only forty-five birds known to man, however, with the ongoing pest control programme, a total of 263 Pareas were accounted for in 2009.

Nowadays it is thought that there are probably around 600 birds in all.



Figure 5 Ground Nesting Parea

They are constantly threatened by possums, the Weka, feral cats and rats that have abandoned the ships that come into the area. Because of their habit of foraging on ground level, they are a main source of prey to these animals and bird species that forage in the same areas. During nesting season, they are at their highest life-threatening risk, as nesting on or near the ground also attracts unwanted enemies. Fortunately for them man is interfering by doing their best to keep these predators at bay. Fencing is helping. Forest regeneration is helping. So long as the Government continues this practice then the Parea will always be a protected and thereby safe species for the world of bird lovers to continue to love.

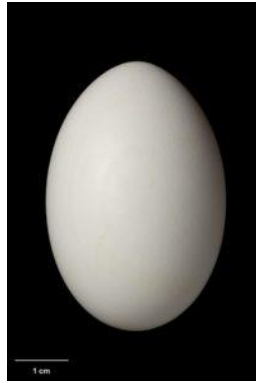


Figure 6 Parea Egg

The homes they build for their families are interesting. Some Parea will build nests all year round, however, it is more usual during winter and spring time which is our June through to November that nesting will be done in earnest. Two chicks are usually reared, one at a time especially during good fruitful seasons. When you come across a nest, you will find a layered area of dead twigs with a solo egg incubated by the mum from late in the afternoon through the night until mid-morning, when her duties are then replaced by dad for the rest of the day. They do this for 10 to 15 days because after this time the chick is ready for exposure and is only fed by a returning parent occasionally, hence it is left alone for much of the time as it continues to mature into its own adulthood.

Both mum and dad Parea defend their nesting territory making sure they are seen on the top of the dead trees in which they have made their nest. Should another bird happen to fly over their area, they will rise up steeply,

halt in mid-air with wings and tail outspread before gliding back to their original position keeping an erect stance with puffed out chests. This is called a “display flight” which can also be seen when returning to their nests to either feed or to sit on their nests.



Figure 7 Pouteretere Bush

They are known to fly for miles for food, not necessarily sticking to their immediate neighbourhood for nourishment. Their favourite feeding places would be forests, Pouteretere bushes found in scrubland that can be quite out in the open, or at the edge of stock grazed areas. Their preferable food consists mainly of fruit from the Hoho, with additional nourishment taken from leaves, leaf buds, flowers or the buds of flowers. Their beaks have evolved over time to compensate for the tougher Hoho leaves when fruit is not readily available.

A Little About The Chatham Island Taiko or Magenta Petrel

Here we have a very rare sea-bird indeed with perhaps only 200 known to exist at the present day.

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Figure 8 Chatham Island Taiko

This is the Chatham Island Taiko. They were the favourite item on the menu during the time of the early settlers to these Islands and by the 1900's they had virtually completely disappeared. We in the world of birds, are fortunate that in 1867 a ship cruising the area captured a bird, The Magenta Petrel naming it after their Italian vessel. Bill Bourne thought that it could be one and the same bird; however, it wasn't until 1978 when David Crockett was making his expeditions to the Chatham Islands that this was verified and the Taiko species was rediscovered and put back onto the lists of the birds of the world. Through the spotlighting programme, these rare birds have been tracked during their flights to their nesting grounds usually in the forests at the southern end of Chatham Island itself and full Government-funded protection is given to the eggs and the young to keep their numbers up.

To identify them let us look at their description here:

“The Chatham Island Taiko is a medium-sized dark-grey-and-white petrel with a distinctive dark-hooded head, long narrow wings and a long pointed tail. As with other gadfly petrels Taiko have large heads, a high forehead, and little neck apparent. The upper surface is uniform dark slate-grey fading to brown with age. The neck and upper breast are also dark. A white chin patch occurs on some birds. The remaining underside is white, including the under tail, and contrasting with the dark-grey under wings. In the hand, the stout black bill (32 mm long and 15 mm deep) has a sharp hook and the tubed nostrils are prominent. The eyes are dark and the legs are pink/white with black patches on the toes.”



Figure 9 Easter Island in the Pacific Ocean

Their call sounds are like moans being an "ooooorr" and "uuuur" type of sound, with the younger ones calling in much higher-pitched squeaks. Their range of flight pattern can take them into the sub tropics of Easter Island in the south-eastern regions of the Pacific Ocean. In saying that, they only breed on the main

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Chatham Island being confined to the forests quite a way inland from the sea itself. Their nests can be found in burrow-type constructions dug way into the peaty soil that exists under very tall forest trees and ferns



Figure 10 Taiko Chick Close to Fledgling Stage

either on the floors of the valley or even on slopes of hills, as long as there is some type of waterway nearby. In saying that, the burrow is usually well drained and lined with an amalgamation of leaf litter and twigs. In order to become airborne again, they just climb the tree under which they are hidden and launch themselves into the air from there. Their feeding grounds are many thousands of miles out into the sea areas, south and east of their breeding grounds. They are known to traverse the Oceans of the Pacific right over to South America as well as across the Tasman Sea to more tropical climates.

It is hard to know exactly how many still exist because of their wide-ranging excursions, however we do know of 200 birds in existence today with roughly twenty burrows marked for the protection programme. Feral

pigs and cats, rats and possums as well as the Weka are their main enemies, however, since 1987 a rigorous pest control programme consisting of traps and poisonous pellets give us all hope for their continued existence. Feral sheep and cattle are kept away by the continual fencing of the Tuku Nature Reserve and the Sweetwater Covenant hilltop where most chicks are taken to give them an expanded and more secure life term.



Figure 11 Taiko White Egg

Breeding season is usually from September to June taking into account our Spring, Summer, and Autumn months with only one white egg laid on an annual basis. Both mum and dad share incubation and feeding duties. Once the chick becomes a fledgling, then it is considered an independent member of the family.



Figure 12 Taiko Burrow Sighting

Volunteers from the Ornithological Society are important to the survival of this species as well. Another great risk to their ultimate survival is because of interbreeding with their cousins of lesser importance. However with the advent of the Chatham Island Taiko Trust, this very rare sea-bird with such a small known population has a great deal of hope in the foreseeable future.

It is amazing what modern day technology can uncover for us as human beings to come to know more about nature and our environment. The Chatham Island Taiko has been videoed landing and entering their burrow in just a mere five seconds. However, it is a favourite pastime to just sit in the entrances for upwards of half an hour just keeping an eye on the immediate surroundings before they actually climb the tree above to depart on their next flight, preferring wet and foggy nights for their coming and going activities.

As with most of the species on the earth today there is a shortage of female partners even with the Taiko, therefore when one stops to listen, small moaning calls can be heard coming from the entrances to some burrows in the hope of attracting a mate. Once found, they are usually monogamous. Diet is poor mainly made up of fish and squid and feeding takes place at any hour of the day or night.



Figure 13 Pohutukawa Flowers

I realise there has been a lot of information put into this chapter for Christmas In The Chatham's, however, I couldn't resist going past all of the information I found about the Islands themselves. In-depth knowledge of where we are focusing our thoughts sometimes tends to give us a deeper understanding of the original topic. I hope that this has been the case with you.

I have certainly learned so much through writing these chapters as a continued series on the Christmas season here in New Zealand.

Our very first episode explained about the visit in 1951 of Father Christmas to these islands. History is a wonderful thing when a mind is filled with curiosity.

The History of Christmas in New Zealand by Debbie Nicholson