

Whangamata Harbour birds: The Pied Stilt

Stilts are a cosmopolitan species occurring right around the world in tropical and warm temperate regions. Our population of pied stilts are thought to have colonised New Zealand as recently as the early 1800's and currently number around 30,000. This rapid colonisation is thought to have occurred as a result of the clearance and conversion of lowland swamp forest into seasonally wet grassland. Their numbers have remained stable around this level over the past 50 years. Their Conservation Status is 'Protected Native'.

This slim, long-legged, black and white wader is resident in small numbers in Whangamatā Harbour and the Otahu Estuary throughout the year. Over the winter months

its numbers increase dramatically when up to 100 birds flock here from other North and South Island populations. A popular high-tide roosting site for these birds is along the rock breakwater wall on the northern side of the Whangamata Marina. Its long fine black bill, very long pink legs that trail behind them when in flight and high pitched yapping calls are its other distinctive identifying features.

Most pied stilts breed in colonies numbering up to 100 pairs, but more commonly 5-20 pairs. These are usually located on gravel riverbed sites, on mounds surrounded by water, open and recently flooded or recently cultivated pastures, margins of ponds, estuaries and other permanent wetlands. Occasionally lone pairs will make breeding



attempts, usually unsuccessfully. The nests are made in shallow depressions lined with grasses, other vegetation and mud. They will lay up to 4 eggs with both adults sharing the incubation duties. Hatching occurs about 25 days after commencement of incubation and the chicks will leave the nest once dry. They will fossick for food themselves straight away under the watchful attention of the parents. They continue to be brooded by their parents as required, even after they have fledged which is usually about four weeks after hatching. Food for both parents and young is largely insectivorous, taking both larval and adult aquatic and terrestrial invertebrates. Worms, crabs, small fish and molluscs and even some flying insects on the

wing are also taken.

Interestingly, New Zealand does have another resident species of stilt, the black stilt. It is classified a "critically endangered endemic species". Its home territory is in the McKenzie Basin, headwaters of the Waitaki River system in the South Island. It's current population is around 200 birds. It has been the subject of an intensive recovery programme since the mid 1970's, due to its high vulnerability to introduced predators and cross-breeding with its "pied" cousins. Unlike most pied stilts, black stilts nest singly, thereby lacking the mutual protection afforded the pied stilts that nest mostly in colonies.

- John Adams, Whangamata Harbour Care. Photos by Bevan Walker.

