

Animals of the Chatham Islands



In the past, the Chatham Islands swarmed with animal life. Marine birds and mammals came ashore to breed or roost, bringing nutrients to enrich the soil. The forests were alive with bird and invertebrate life. Waterways supported huge numbers of wetland birds and fish. The shore was a treasure trove of shellfish, crustaceans, fish and birds.

Harvesting, large-scale clearance of vegetation (especially forest) for farming and human-imported animals have taken a large toll on the wildlife. Rats, mice, pigs, possums, hedgehogs, cats and dogs consumed innumerable indigenous animals and their food supplies. Cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, horses and possums have turned the complex indigenous vegetation cover into hollow fragments. Many of these animals are now controlled in the Chatham's protected areas.

Mammals

Prior to human arrival, the only mammals at the Chatham Islands were marine creatures: seals, whales and dolphins. Seals and whales, formerly abundant, were hunted to near-extinction, especially during the nineteenth century. They have since made a slow comeback. Now it is possible to see fur seals at several breeding colonies and haulout sites. Sighting sea lions, leopard seals and elephant seals is a matter of chance encounter around the coasts. Whales and dolphins are regularly seen at sea.

Birds

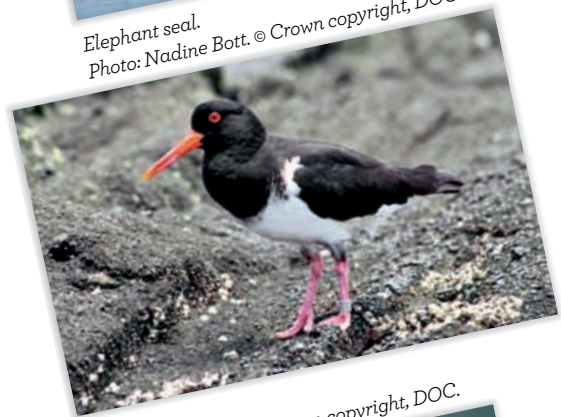
Several bird species have become extinct since humans arrived at the Chatham Islands. They include a penguin, a swan, a duck, a merganser, several flightless rails, a fernbird and a bellbird. Endemic sea birds that have survived include toroa (northern royal albatross) which also breeds at Taiaroa Head near Dunedin, established from Chatham birds, taiko (reduced to a small population at Tuku), torea (Chatham Island oystercatcher) found around the shores, Chatham petrel, which breeds only on Rangatira and Pitt Island, Chatham Island shag and Pitt Island shag. Surviving endemic land birds include parea (Chatham Island pigeon) and Chatham Island warbler, Forbes' parakeet and Chatham Island snipe, Chatham Island tūi, Chatham Island tomtit and black robin. None of these birds are common and recovery programmes are underway for the most threatened of them.



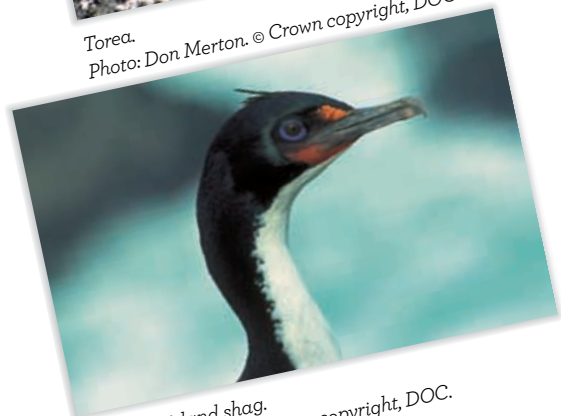
Large-scale clearance of vegetation has had a profound effect on the landscape and wildlife of Chatham Island.
Photo: DOC. © Crown copyright.



Elephant seal.
Photo: Nadine Bott. © Crown copyright, DOC.



Torea.
Photo: Don Merton. © Crown copyright, DOC.



Chatham Island shag.
Photo: Rod Morris. © Crown copyright, DOC.

Many sea bird species are still quite common around the Chatham Islands. Buller's mollymawk, prions, skuas, sooty shearwaters, storm petrels and little blue penguins are most likely to be seen at sea. Around the coasts, those most frequently seen include southern black-backed gull, red-billed gull, white-fronted tern, shags and skuas and less often giant petrels. Banded dotterel and pipit are often on the shore too.

Te Whanga and the freshwater lakes and swamps of Chatham Island provide extensive habitat for wetland birds. Most common are black swan, black shag, mallard and grey ducks, pukeko, pied stilt and various migratory waders.

In open country (farmland, bracken and shrubland), introduced finches and songbirds are common, as are harrier, spur-winged plover and buff weka. Weka, imported from Canterbury (where they are now extinct) around 1905, have proliferated to such an extent that they are regarded as something of a pest and are a favourite seasonal food source.

Birds of forests include kākārīki (red-crowned parakeet), parea, Chatham Island warbler and Chatham Island fantail. Chatham Island tūi and Chatham Island tomtit had become confined to Pitt Island, Rangatira and Mangere Island, but recent translocations of tūi have established new populations on Chatham Island.

Lizards

The Chatham Island skink is considered almost extinct on the main islands, but remains common on Mangere Island, Little Mangere Island and Rangatira, as well as a few of the larger stacks off southern Pitt Island.

Invertebrates

Of the 750–800 species of insects described so far on the Chatham Islands, about twenty percent are endemic. In the past, the Chathams would have been absolutely bustling with invertebrates, nurtured in the nutrient-rich environment. Glimpses of this plenitude can be had at night on Rangatira, where in summer the forests swarm with spiders, cockroaches, wētā and beetles. Habitat destruction and introduced mammals have led to the loss of such invertebrate riches on the inhabited islands. On Chatham Island and Pitt Island, the most you are likely to encounter nowadays are great quantities of flies, orb-web spiders whose webs are stronger than you would expect, and red admiral butterflies.

Threatened invertebrates of the Chatham Islands include the Rangatira spider, Chathams giant click beetle, giant stag beetle, speargrass weevil, Pitt Island longhorn, "Thotmus" weevil and giant stick insect. Most survive only on island refuges, whilst some are hanging on in forest reserves on the main islands.

Freshwater fishes

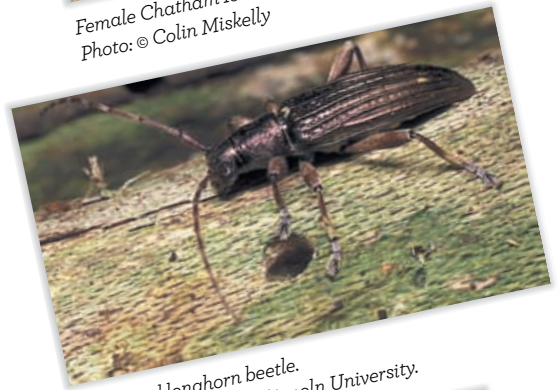
All freshwater fishes in the Chatham Islands are indigenous. They include longfin eel, shortfin eel, lamprey, common bully, redfin bully, common smelt and five species of galaxiid fish: giant kokopū, banded kokopū, koaro and inanga. The young of the galaxiids are harvested as whitebait. The Chatham Island mudfish which is the only endemic fresh water fish, has only been found in three land-locked lakes on the southern tableland.



Chatham Island tūi.
Photo: Dave Crouchley © Crown copyright, DOC.



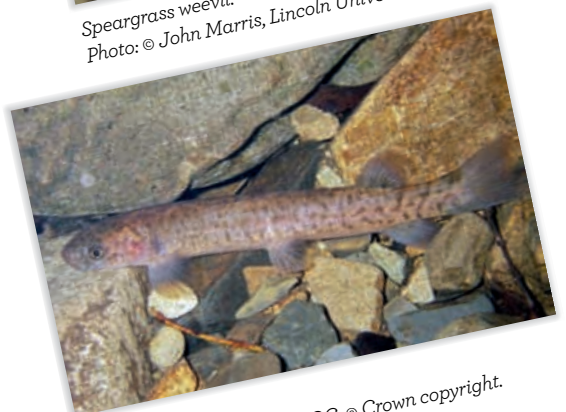
Female Chatham Island tomtit.
Photo: © Colin Miskelly



Pitt Island longhorn beetle.
Photo: © John Marris, Lincoln University.



Speargrass weevil.
Photo: © John Marris, Lincoln University.



Koaro.
Photo: Andrew Morrison, DOC. © Crown copyright.