



# Fantail / piwakawaka

## Native birds

Known for its friendly 'cheet cheet' call and energetic flying antics, the aptly named fantail is one of the most common and widely distributed native birds on the New Zealand mainland. It is easily recognized by its long tail which opens to a fan. It has a small head and bill and has two colour forms, pied and melanistic or black. The pied birds are grey-brown with white and black bands.

### Where is it found?

The fantail is widespread throughout New Zealand and its offshore islands, including the Chatham Islands and Snares Islands. It is common in most regions of the country, except in the dry, open country of inland Marlborough and Central Otago, where frosts and snow falls are too harsh for it. It also breeds widely in Australia and some Pacific Islands.

The fantail is one of the few native bird species in New Zealand that has been able to adapt to an environment greatly altered by humans. Originally a bird of open native forests and scrub, it is now also found in exotic plantation forests, in orchards and in gardens. At times, fantails may appear far from any

D. Mudge

large stands of shrubs or trees, and it has an altitudinal range that extends from sea level to the snow line.

### Fantail facts

- There are about 10 sub-species of fantail, three of which live in New Zealand: the North Island fantail, the South Island fantail and the Chatham Islands fantail.
- Fantails use their broad tails to change direction quickly while hunting for insects. They sometimes hop around upside-down amongst tree ferns and foliage to pick insects from the underside of leaves. Their main prey are moths, flies, spiders, wasps, and beetles, although they sometimes also eat fruit. They seldom feed on the ground.



- The fantail lifespan is relatively short in New Zealand (the oldest bird recorded here was 3 years old, although in Australia they have been recorded up to 10 years). Fantails stay in pairs all year but high mortality means that they seldom survive more than one season.
- The success of the species is largely due to the fantail's prolific and early breeding. Juvenile males can start breeding between 2–9 months old, and females can lay as many as 5 clutches in one season, with between 2–5 eggs per clutch.
- Fantail populations fluctuate greatly from year to year, especially when winters are prolonged or severe storms hit in spring. However, since they are prolific breeders, they are able to spring back quickly after such events.
- Both adults incubate eggs for about 14 days and the chicks fledge at about 13 days. Both adults will feed the young, but as soon as the female starts building the next nest the male takes over the role of feeding the previous brood. Young are fed about every 10 minutes – about 100 times per day!
- In Māori mythology the fantail was responsible for the presence of death in the world. Maui, thinking he could eradicate death by successfully passing through the goddess of death, Hine-nui-te-po, tried to enter the goddess's sleeping body through the pathway of birth. The fantail, warned by Maui to be quiet, began laughing and woke Hine-nui-te-po, who was so angry that she promptly killed Maui.

North Island fantail  
D. Veitch



## Did you know?

Fantails use three methods to catch insects. The first, called hawking, is used where vegetation is open and the birds can see for long distances. Fantails use a perch to spot swarms of insects and then fly at the prey, snapping several insects at a time.

The second method that fantails use in denser vegetation is called flushing. The fantail flies around to disturb insects, flushing them out before eating them.

Feeding associations are the third way fantails find food. Every trumper is familiar with this method, where the fantail follows another bird or animal to capture insects disturbed by their movements. Fantails frequently follow feeding silvereyes, whiteheads, parakeets and saddlebacks, as well as people.

## Threats

Cats, rats, stoats and mynas are as great an enemy to fantails as they are to other native birds. Of all the eggs and chicks fantails produce, only a few survive and grow up. However, the secret to fantails' relative success compared to other native birds is their ability to produce lots of young. Some chicks are therefore likely to escape predation and populations can bounce back quickly after a decline. Its broad diet of small insects also makes the fantail resilient to environmental change, because certain insect populations increase in disturbed and deforested habitats.

## How can you help?

If you would like to encourage pīwakawaka to make your garden their home, plant a variety of native plants that will encourage small insects. The Department of Conservation has more information on plantings that will attract various native birds to your garden.

## Further information

For more information on fantails, please visit your local Department of Conservation office.

P. Forest

