



Tūi

Native birds

Māori have a proverb to describe a great orator or singer, 'Me he korokoro tūi – he has the throat of a tūi'. With its repertoire of bell and flute-like notes, harsh clicks, barks, cackles and wheezes, the tūi can copy the sound of a meowing cat, a cell-phone or even human speech. As a result, people often mistake its call.

Tūi (*Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae*) live throughout much of New Zealand and its outlying islands, including the sub-tropical Kermadec and sub-Antarctic Auckland islands. The Chatham Islands subspecies is larger than that of the mainland. The distinctive white tuft under its throat contrasts dramatically with the metallic blue-green sheen to its underlying black colour. Captain Cook likened the look of the white throat feathers to Tahitian earrings, adding that the tūi is 'not more remarkable for the beauty of its plumage than the sweetness of its note. The flesh is also most delicious and was the greatest luxury the wood afforded us'.

Tūi have a high cultural significance to Māori, who also considered it a delicacy. They have many names for the bird, depending on age, sex and condition. For example the female tūi in early summer is called kōkōtea, after which it is called kouwha. Māori sometimes taught tūi to recite complex greetings to visitors, some with over 150 words.

Tūi belong to the honeyeater family but will eat insects and fruit as well as nectar. They are important pollinators of many native trees and will fly long distances to reach seasonal nectar-producing plants. Tūi collect nectar with the aid of their brush-like tongues.

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Aggressive defenders

Tūi defend their space against intruders and can combine to mob magpies, harrier hawks and even falcons. Males chase other birds from their territory with loud wing-flapping, screeching, feather-fluffing, and even mimicry of the invading species' alarm call.

Did you know?

- A tūi in song is effectively performing a duet: It has two voice boxes.
- Some of the sounds tūi make are so high that the human ear cannot detect them.
- Tūi sometimes sing on moonlit nights, once considered a bad omen.
- Tūi can perform the alarm calls of other bird species to scare them away.

Breeding

During courtship in September and October males perform display dives, flying up in a sweeping arc then swooping down almost vertically. Females build a nest from twigs, fine grass and moss. They lay 2–4 eggs, which they alone incubate for two weeks. The chicks are also fed mainly by their mothers, leaving the nest when about three weeks old.

How can I support tūi?

The tūi has suffered from forest clearance and the introduction of possums, cats, rats, stoats, and ferrets. Effective predator control results in a dramatic rise in their numbers. A practical way to help tūi is to get involved in a local bush restoration or predator-control project. You could also plant a variety of nectar and fruit-producing native trees and shrubs at home to provide year-round food. Tūi also love the nectar of the introduced Australian trees banksia and eucalyptus. For more information on suitable plants and planting times, refer to Tree Planting for Native Birds on the Department of Conservation website www.doc.govt.nz.



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