Tucked into cliffside crevices high above the water, shag nests aren’t easy to spot at first glance. In a small boat, two DOC scientists travelled 150 km from Awaroa Bay to Kaiteriteri, scouring the coastline with binoculars to record the number of nest and roost sites of these once-hunted birds.

Shags are an important link between land-based and marine ecosystems, since they feed on fish but add nutrients to coastal land via their guano (droppings). The birds are sensitive to changes in both environments and are a good indicator of ecosystem health in their locality.

This survey in November 2012 was the first count of shags living in Abel Tasman National Park. Although it was not exhaustive, the survey recorded baseline information that could be used to track a decline or increase in shag numbers in the future.
Threats to shags
Many coastal bird populations, including shags, are affected by increasing human activity and coastal development in New Zealand. Climate change is also expected to influence seabirds as changes occur in the size and distribution of the fish populations on which they feed.

Shags are vulnerable to oil spills and have drowned after being trapped in craypots or tangled in fishing gear. Their habit of roosting in (and occasionally killing) large trees sometimes brings them into conflict with people who dislike their noisy habits and guano.

Shag numbers
Spotted shags were the most common species found in Abel Tasman National Park. 1,207 spotted shags and 61 active spotted shag nests as well as 9 pied shags and 19 active pied shag nests were recorded. Pied shags have colonised (or re-colonised) this area in the past 10–15 years.

Spotted shag nest
Pied shag nest
Survey lines

What’s next?
Future resurveys of the current shag nesting and roosting sites using the same GPS coordinates would quantify any population changes in the area. This data could signal any changes in the nearby land and marine environments, and interactions between them (e.g. an increase in sedimentation from local rivers).

Research to identify factors (including food supply, availability of suitable breeding sites and impact of human activity) that cause fluctuations in the shag population would also be valuable.

Find out more
Read the full publication: Distribution and abundance of shags in Abel Tasman National Park
http://notornis.osnz.org.nz/node/4278

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