



Seabird ecology

Where and how do seabirds nest?



New Zealand is often called the manu moana/seabird capital of the world because of the large number of seabirds that breed here—85 different species. Did you know that many of the seabirds that nest in New Zealand do not breed anywhere else in the world?

Although many seabirds do nest on the mainland most of our seabird species breed only on surrounding islands and rock stacks.

Different kinds of nests

Surface nesting

Some seabirds, like tara-iti/fairy terns, build nests that are simply scrapes in the sand, set in amongst broken seashells. The brown speckled eggs they lay and their chicks are well camouflaged from some predators—sometimes too well camouflaged! Many seabird and shorebird nests are in danger of being run over by vehicles or being trampled because they are so hard to see.

Many seabirds lay their ngā hua manu/eggs near the edges of steep cliffs. Does a cliff seem like a safe place to raise a pīpī /chick? Even though cliffs can be dangerous places, they are also hard places for some predators to reach and they provide the adult seabirds with easy access to food. For large seabirds, cliffs can also be easier places to take-off from.



White-capped albatross on nest, photo courtesy DOC, Peter McClelland

Key words

- camouflage, burrow
- kōhanga – nest
- hua manu – egg
- pīpī – chick

Manu moana - Seabird

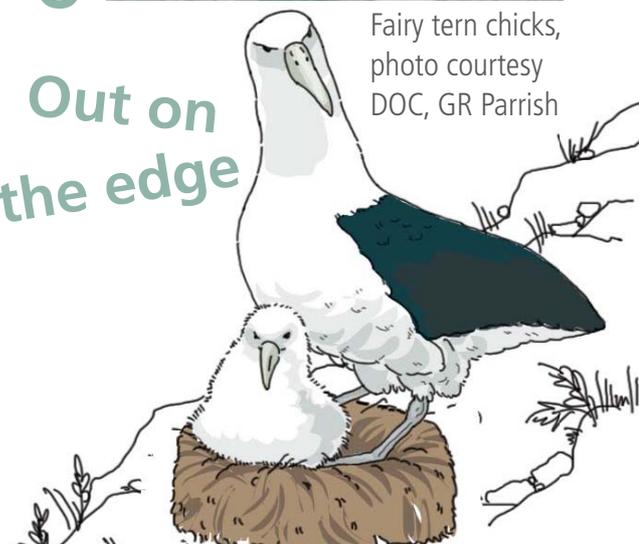
- kororā – little blue penguin
- tara-iti – fairy tern

Camouflaged

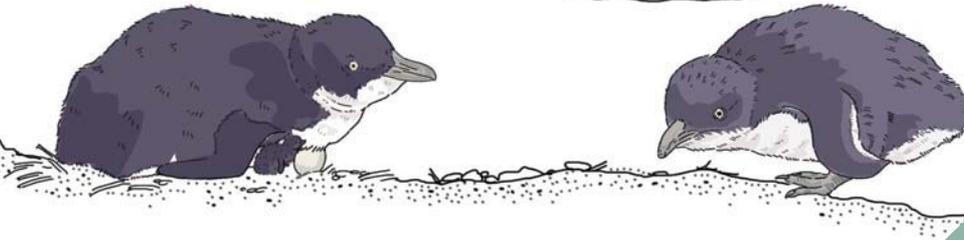


Fairy tern chicks, photo courtesy DOC, GR Parrish

Out on the edge



Burrowing in



Many seabirds build their nests in burrows or holes. For example, the kui/grey petrel builds an elaborate burrow with a tunnel that leads to a large, dry nest chamber with a mound of vegetation for the nest.

Other birds are not as fussy. Kororā/little blue penguins will nest in underground burrows, in rock crevices, under houses and boat sheds, in stormwater pipes or even between railway tracks. Some of their burrow choices are not safe.

One way to make sure little blue penguins are nesting in secure places is to build nest boxes for them to use. All over New Zealand children and adults volunteer their time to build, place and monitor little blue penguin nest boxes. In many places the breeding success of little blue penguins that use nest boxes is higher than those that don't. Part of the reason for this is because the way nest boxes are designed stops two of the little blue penguin's biggest predators—dogs and cats—from being able to get in.



Person putting little blue penguin in penguin box, photo courtesy DOC, Neville Peat



Little blue penguins peering out of burrow, photo courtesy DOC, Rod Morris

What you can do

People, pets and vehicles are a major threat to nesting birds. Make sure you stay away from areas where you know nests are and when you're on the beach watch where you're stepping. Try not to take vehicles on beaches or other bird nesting areas, especially during breeding season.

Remember, if you see eggs or chicks the chances are their parents are close by. Do not touch or remove eggs or chicks from their nests and move away from the area quickly – their parents won't return to the nest until you've gone.

Keep your dogs and cats in at night. Keep your dog on a lead at all times unless the area is posted as an off-lead area.



Black-fronted tern chick, photo courtesy DOC, Rod Morris