



Seabird ecology

We're all in this together – seabird colonies

Colonial nesters

Each breeding season, millions of seabirds return to New Zealand to breed. These colonial nesters like to breed in the same spot as others of their species and often return to exactly the same nesting area.

There are many advantages to nesting in a colony: it's easier to find a mate, there is less competition from other bird species, young birds can learn from older birds, and there can be safety in numbers against natural predators.

What do you think might be some of the disadvantages? What happens if a disease or bad storm hits a colony? What about predators like rats or dogs or humans?

Storm troubles

There are only about 20,000 toroa-whakaingo/northern royal albatross in the world and they all breed in New Zealand. Over 99 per cent of this species kōhanga/nest in the Chatham Islands and the rest nest at Taiaroa Head near Dunedin.

In 1985, a storm wiped out the vegetation and loose soil at the northern royal albatrosses' colonies in the Chatham Islands. After that storm the albatrosses had to build their nests out of stones or on bare rock and most of their eggs ended up breaking. Then in 1994 another storm with gusts of wind up to 188 kilometres per hour caused eggs to fall out of nests and break. The wind was so strong it even blew adult albatrosses off their nests.

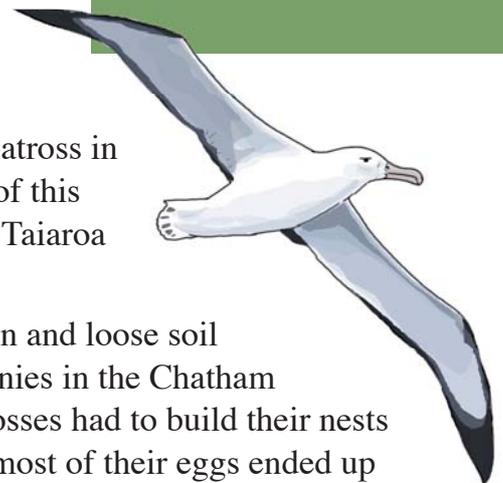
Scientists believe that the northern royal albatross population in the Chatham Islands is still recovering from these bad storms. What do you think would happen if another disaster hit the albatross colonies in the Chatham Islands?

Key words

colony, fledgling
kaitiaki - guardian
kōhanga – nest

Manu moana – Seabird

Antipodean albatross
Hutton's shearwater
toroa-whakaingo – northern
royal albatross



White-capped albatross, photo courtesy DOC, Fred Bruemmer

Building a new colony

Most seabirds prefer to return to where they were born to nest and raise their young, but there are exceptions. One of the most well known colonies to be established in recent history is the northern royal albatross colony at Taiaroa Head near Dunedin.

In 2003 a pair of Antipodean albatrosses began breeding on the Chatham Islands—a place where there is no record of them ever breeding before.

We don't know why some pairs of seabirds are willing to start new colonies, but we do know that having several colonies in different locations increases a species chances for survival. Can you think of reasons why?

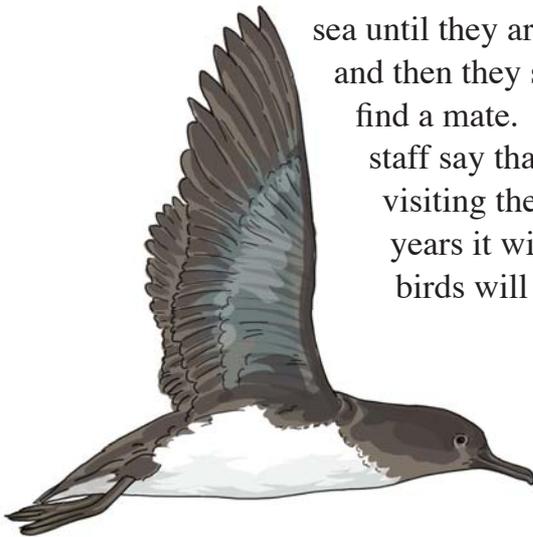
A little help

Sometimes conservationists give certain seabird species a nudge to start a new colony. They may do this by trying to lure nesting pairs to a location or by moving fledglings to a new spot.

One of the few seabird species that nests solely on the mainland, Hutton's shearwaters currently breed at only two sites. Establishing more breeding colonies is one way to ensure the survival of the species.

The Department of Conservation, Te Runanga o Kaikoura, Whale Watch Kaikoura, Kaikoura District Council and local Forest and Bird members have been working together as kaitiaki/guardians of Hutton's shearwaters by moving fledglings to a third location on the Kaikoura Peninsula.

Hutton's shearwaters spend most of their time at sea until they are at least four or five years old and then they start visiting the colony to find a mate. Department of Conservation staff say that if the transferred birds start visiting the new site in the next few years it will be a good sign the young birds will return there to breed.



Hutton's shearwater



Australasian gannet colony, photo courtesy DOC



Hutton's shearwater fledgling being fed, photo courtesy Paul McGahan



Hutton's shearwater fledgling fed a seafood smoothie, photo courtesy Paul McGahan