



# Seabird ecology

## Raising their young



Of the world's 359 manu moana/seabird species nearly one-quarter (85 species) breed in New Zealand. Of these 85 species 35 breed nowhere else in the world.

Each seabird species courts, mates and raises their young in slightly different ways. Some seabirds build their nests on cliffs and others build theirs at beaches just above the high-tide line. Most seabird species breed every year, but some large species only breed every other year. Most seabirds mate with the same partner breeding season after breeding season.

## It takes two

Seabird parents share the responsibility of raising their young. They take turns foraging at sea and staying at the nest to incubate ngā manu/eggs and guard the young chicks.

Shag, gull and tern parents take short trips in search of food and relieve each other of nest duty on at least a daily basis. Other seabirds may go out to sea in search of food for up to two weeks before they return to take over guarding the nest.

Albatrosses, shearwaters and petrels all belong to the Order Procellariiformes. The long-lived seabirds in this group are slow breeders. Most species do not breed until they are at least four years old and some like the giant petrel and several albatrosses don't breed until they are about 10 years old. That isn't old for humans, but compared to other birds that's ancient!



Australasian gannets courtship display, photo courtesy DOC, Rod Morris

### Key words

displays, regurgitation, incubate, foraging

hua manu – egg

kōhanga – nest

pīpī – chick

### Manu moana – Seabird

Buller's albatross

Chatham tāiko

pāngurunguru – northern giant petrel

toroa-whakaingo – northern royal albatross

### Displays of affection

Toroa-whakaingo/northern royal albatross usually only breed every other year. Even though most albatross mate with the same partner for life they still have courting rituals.

Courtship displays include bill clapping, preening each other, opening their wings and sky calling. To sky call the albatross calls out while pointing its beak toward the sky.

Procellariiformes usually lay only one egg. The parents take turns incubating the egg. When the egg hatches the parents continue taking turns guarding the chick until it's old enough to be left alone. As the pīpī/chick gets older it needs more and more food so both parents need to leave the nest for long periods of time to search for enough food to feed themselves and their growing chick.

If something happens to one of the parents during the breeding season it can mean that the chick and even the other parent could die. It takes so much energy to raise a chick that both parents need to be involved the whole time.



Fairy prion pair at nest, photo courtesy DOC, Rod Morris



White-capped albatross courtship display, photo courtesy DOC, CJR Robertson

## Seafood smoothies

Parents feed their chicks by regurgitating food that they've eaten while foraging at sea. The reflex for the parents is a lot like vomiting. Although it doesn't sound appetising to us, what comes out of the parent's mouth is energy-rich food that helps their young survive.

## Time to fly

The length of time seabirds spend at their breeding colonies ranges from several weeks to nearly a year. Parents may stop feeding their young and quit returning to the breeding colony several weeks before their fledglings are able to take off on their own.

It's hard to believe, but by the time the adults leave the colony most fledglings are able to defend themselves against their natural predators. But introduced predators (e.g. rats, stoats, ferrets, dogs and cats) pose a threat to the young birds.

People in New Zealand are working to remove introduced predators from many of our offshore islands. In places where all introduced pests and predators can't be removed traps and fences are placed around nesting areas.



White-flipped penguin, photo courtesy DOC, Peter Reese



Buller's albatross, photo courtesy Southern Seabird Solutions