

ENDEMIC SPECIES FEATURE

NGIRUNGIRU

South Island Tomtit

Petroica macrocephala macrocephala

If you were to breed a bird for cuteness, you would be hard pressed to outdo the tomtit. It resembles a cross between a fantail, Tweety Bird and a panda. Tomtits belong to the same genus as the New Zealand robin (kakarua) and are likewise endemic to New Zealand. Like robins, tomtits feed primarily on insects and other small invertebrates such as spiders and worms. While robins tend to forage on or near the ground, tomtits forage throughout all levels of the forest.

There are 5 subspecies of tomtit (*Petroica macrocephala*), one for each of the following: North Island, South Island, Chatham Island, Snares Island, and Auckland Island. The Maori name for the North Island tomtit is miromiro and for the South Island tomtit ngirungiru. The North and South Island tomtits are smaller than the offshore tomtits. With the exception of the Snares Island tomtit, which is all black, male tomtits are black and white, while females are grey-brown and white. The males of the South, Chatham and Auckland Islands differ from those of the North Island tomtit in having a yellow tinge on their breasts.

Tomtits inhabit forests and shrublands, both native and exotic. Year round, pairs protect large territories of about 4 hectares in size. The breeding season of the South Island tomtit extends from September to February, during which they may produce up to 3 clutches, each containing 3-6 eggs. Nest building and incubation are jobs exclusive to the female, while the male brings her food. Both parents feed the chicks and fledglings. When they are older, the female may leave the fledglings in the care of her mate while she builds a new nest for a new clutch.

While not endangered, tomtits are vulnerable to predation from introduced mammalian species, especially rats. Tomtits within the Brook Waimarama Sanctuary have benefited greatly from the eradication of exotic mammals. The average number of tomtits seen or heard during our five-minute bird counts has tripled since 2017 from 7 detected per 100 five-minute bird counts to over 21.

Written by:

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Female tomtit. Photo credit: Deb Corbett



Male tomtit. Photo credit: Dave Curtis



Male tomtit. Photo credit: Hannahshanart