

SPECIES FEATURE

PŪTANGITANGI Paradise Shelduck *Tadorna variegata*

Pūtangitangi are perhaps better known as paradise ducks, though they are actually shelducks. Shelducks, all of which belong to the genus *Tadorna*, are pied waterfowl belonging to the same family as ducks, geese and swans. While shelducks are found throughout the world, pūtangitangi are endemic to New Zealand. The only other shelduck present in New Zealand is a rare vagrant from Australia, the chestnut-breasted shelduck.

Pūtangitangi are usually associated with pastureland, where they graze on the seed heads of grasses, clover and grains, and wetlands, where they feed on aquatic weeds, crustaceans and molluscs. However, they can also be found in the Brook Waimārama Sanctuary, swimming in the Brook Stream, flying across the valley, and perching high in the canopy, where they look decidedly out of place with their webbed feet.

Pūtangitangi reach sexual maturity at 2 years. The female has a white head, the male black. The male call is a deep 'zonk zonk' while the female's is a higher pitched 'zeek zeek'. Pairs return to the same breeding territory year after year. In August or September, a pair will produce a clutch of 5-15 eggs, though more typically 8-9, laid in a large nest of grass lined with down. Nests are usually placed on the ground, concealed under logs or long grass. Occasionally, pūtangitangi nest in holes high in a tree.

The female incubates the eggs for 21-22 days, leaving them unattended 2 to 3 times a day to feed. Both parents care for the ducklings. Pūtangitangi are vigilant and protective parents and will fake a broken wing to lure a predator away from their young. Ducklings can fly at about 8 weeks of age. At this stage their plumage is similar to that of an adult male, though the females have small white patches around their eyes and bills which expand over the next few months to cover their heads and tops of their necks. Offspring may remain with their parents for up to 3 months.

Moulting takes place from December to February. Pūtangitangi are unable to fly when moulting, which makes them highly vulnerable to hunting and predation. Seeking safety in numbers, they congregate in flocks around ponds, lakes and riverbeds.



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Pūtangitangi were a valuable food source for Māori, who rounded them up in large numbers while they were moulting. When Europeans arrived, pūtangitangi were not common and their numbers declined through the 19th century. The conversion of forests to pastureland, devastating for many other species, was advantageous to pūtangitangi as they have a preference for grasses and clover. They also benefited from the creation of stock ponds, though the introduction of hunting restrictions likely had the greatest impact on their survival. These handsome birds are now common and widespread across New Zealand.

Compiled by Katherine Chamberlain