

SHORT NOTE

Long-lived variable oystercatchers (*Haematopus unicolor*)

EMILY C. ROBERTS*

Taranaki Regional Council, Private Bag 713, Stratford 4352, New Zealand

JOHN E. DOWDING

DM Consultants, P.O. Box 36-274, Merivale, Christchurch 8146, New Zealand

The variable oystercatcher (*Haematopus unicolor*, VOC) is an endemic species found around much of the coastline of New Zealand (Dowding 2014). The population was estimated at about 2,000 birds in the early 1970s (Baker 1973), but has increased rapidly since then, and more recent estimates are in the range 5,000–7,000 individuals (Bell 2010; Dowding 2017). Under the New Zealand Threat Ranking Scheme, the species is currently ranked At Risk (Recovering) (Robertson *et al.* 2017); under IUCN criteria, it is ranked Least Concern (BirdLife International 2019).

Many oystercatcher species are long-lived (Ens & Underhill 2014). We record here a number of VOCs that have exceeded 30 years of age, including one recently seen alive at more than 37 years, and compare this to maximum ages recorded for other oystercatcher taxa.

During his study of the species in the 1970s, Allan Baker banded a number of birds at Waipu Estuary, North Auckland (35.99395°S, 174.48338°E). In the 1990s, some of these were re-captured and re-banded with new colour combinations by JED. Seven birds in this group were of known age, and five of them subsequently reached 31 years or more (Table 1).

An individual that is older than any of the birds listed in Table 1 has recently been sighted. On 27 April 2019, ECR read the metal band number (K-7446) from photographs of a VOC foraging on the south side of the Mokau Estuary (38.70130°S, 174.62231°E), on the Waikato-Taranaki boundary. She had seen what was almost certainly the same bird at the same location on 19 November 2017, but the complete band number was not read on that occasion. K-7446 was banded by Ray Benfell as a chick on Somes Island, Wellington Harbour (41.25760°S, 174.86548°E) on 2 January 1982. At the time of the 2019 sighting, the bird was therefore 37 years 4 months of age. The straight-line distance between the banding site and the 2019 sighting is ~285 km.

In 2004, Barry Hartley reported this bird to the Banding Office as “seen since February 1998 at Mokau and the metal band number recorded on 23 January 2004”. VOCs typically first breed at about 5 years old (Dowding 2014); as K-7446 was 16 years old in 1998, Mokau may not have been its first breeding site. The 2004 sighting was about 2.4 km north of the 2017 and 2019 sightings.

The bird was not captured in 2019, so it was not possible to examine the band closely, but it appeared from photographs to be in good condition (see <https://inaturalist.nz/observations/23328562>). The entire inscription was legible, and there was no

Table 1. Age at last sighting of variable oystercatchers (*Haematopus unicolor*) of known age banded at Waipu in the 1970s and re-banded in the 1990s. P = pullus, J = juvenile (less than 1 year old).

Original band	Date banded	Age	New bands	Date re-banded	Last sighting	Age at last sighting
K-3343	15 Jan 1970	P	K-5286 KOG	25 Nov 1994	Nov 2002	32y 10m
K-3395	12 Apr 1970	J	K-10750 KYB	20 Oct 1999	Oct 2004	34y 7m
K-4636	3 Jan 1971	P	K-10768 WKW	18 Dec 1999	Nov 2004	33y 11m
K-4644	7 Jan 1971	P	K-10740 YOW	8 Feb 1999	Jan 2003	32y 0m
K-2955	9 Jan 1979	P	K-5297 YOG	23 Mar 1995	Feb 1996	17y 1m
K-2954	10 Jan 1979	P	K-5346 GYK	6 Jan 1997	Feb 2002	23y 1m
K-2958	11 Jan 1979	P	K-5285 GOG	25 Nov 1994	Jan 2010	31y 0m

evidence of callousing or other injury to the bird's foot. It is also evident from the photographs that the bird has a distinctive scattering of white feathers on its head and breast.

Many New Zealand bird species are known to be long-lived (e.g. Wilson 2004), and VOCs appear to be no exception. We believe K-7446 to be the oldest known oystercatcher of any of the three New Zealand species. The oldest South Island pied oystercatchers (*H. finschi*, SIPO) known were 21 years minimum (P.M. Sagar *pers. comm.*), but given the annual adult survival value for the species, some SIPO may be expected to live longer (Sagar & Veitch 2014). Two Chatham Island oystercatchers (*H. chathamensis*) have reached 30 years old; one was banded as an adult and reached 30 years minimum (Moore 2014), and one banded as a chick was last seen at age 30 years 0 months (Department of Conservation CIO database). Colour bands on New Zealand oystercatchers typically last about 12–15 years before wearing through and being lost (JED *pers. obs.*). Birds carrying a metal band only are more likely to be overlooked, so recapture and replacement of colour bands helps to determine maximum ages for these and other species that survive longer than a single set of colour bands.

The most numerous and well-studied oystercatcher globally is the Eurasian oystercatcher (*H. ostralegus*). The oldest known individual of that species reached 43 years 4 months, with the second-oldest 36 years 11 months (Fransson *et al.* 2017). The oldest American oystercatcher (*H. palliatus*) was at least 23 years 10 months (Lutmerding & Love 2017). In Australia, the oldest known pied oystercatcher (*H. longirostris*) was 32 years 2.3 months (Department of the Environment 2019a), and the oldest sooty oystercatcher (*H. fuliginosus*) was 25 years 6.7 months (Department of the Environment 2019b).

Based on the records we have found, K-7446 appears to be the oldest oystercatcher of any of the New Zealand species, and is possibly the second-

oldest oystercatcher of any species globally. It was alive when sighted in April 2019, and appears to have been site-faithful for many years, so it will be interesting to monitor its further survival.

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