



Rangatira (South-East Island) is a haven for rare bird life. The Chatham Island petrel breeds only on the island, returning to its nesting burrow at night. Fewer than 20 of this rare petrel have been banded.

Photo: Mark Bellingham

**R**angatira Island (South-East Island) must rank as one of the most important of New Zealand's nature reserves. All the bird species recorded by ornithologists in 1871 are still present; only on Rangatira are the rare New Zealand shore plover and the Chatham Island petrel found. Thirteen of the 15 endemic Chatham Island birds, the Chatham Island skink, numerous endemic insects and two-thirds of the endemic Chatham Island plants make their home on the island.

The reason why Rangatira abounds in wildlife is simple: there are no rats on the island. Incredibly, no rats became established from ships that called in during the whaling days, and no exotic animals remain today.

Humans first came to Rangatira more than 700 years ago. The Moriori used to collect seabirds and eggs, but they did not live on the island, and today no sign of their presence remains.

European sealers and whalers arrived in the early 19th century, and a whaling station was established in 1880. Sheep, cattle and goats were introduced during this time and the goats soon reached epidemic numbers. Until 1957 the island was farmed, with the last sheep removed by the Wildlife Service in 1961.

Today the birds, insects and plants have the island to themselves, except for the occasional company of human beings

who come to observe them. The forest is regenerating to the extent that it is almost the same as when man first arrived.

### Endangered birds

The rare Chatham Island petrel spends most of its life far out in the Pacific Ocean, but during the breeding season returns to its nesting burrow at night. Petrels have an uncanny ability to fly directly to their burrows without losing their way.

Once widespread in New Zealand, by the 1880s the colourful shore plover had become restricted to the rocky shore and salt meadows of Rangatira, where a population of 120 now remains. Its habit of nesting under vegetation made it vulnerable to mammalian predators. This appears to be why it disappeared from mainland New Zealand and Chatham Island.

The best known of the Chatham Island birds is the celebrated black robin, which has increased its numbers to 38 from a low of seven. In 1982 some were transferred from Mangere Island to Rangatira, where the better forest has given the population an opportunity to expand.

A semi-nocturnal bird of tussock and forest, the Chatham Island snipe — the smallest of New Zealand's snipe — had at one stage disappeared from all of the Chathams except Rangatira. In 1970 it was successfully re-introduced to Mangere. The bird's unusual aerial display, and the sound made during this display, has given rise to Moriori legends of a large mythical bird.

The forests on Rangatira support all

## Rangatira — a key nature reserve

Few mainlanders ever have the opportunity to visit the Chatham Islands, a wind-swept group of two large and more than a dozen smaller islands about 870 km to the east of Christchurch. And yet these remote islands are among the most important for our native flora and fauna.

**Alison Davis**, a research student at Auckland University, outlines in this article the significance of Rangatira, or South-East Island. Only 218 hectares in size, the island nevertheless harbours a large number of endangered bird species, as well as rare insects and plants.

the forest birds of the Chathams except the Forbes parakeet. The Chatham Island parakeet is especially common; I saw many of their nests in holes in the old stands of akeake (*Olearia traversii*).

At night the forest is alive with the sound and movement of thousands of nesting seabirds, whose burrowing has left the forest floor bare of most vegetation. Rangatira is the main breeding ground for the broad billed prion and the white-faced storm petrel — more than a million pairs of the latter breed on the island! One of the world's smallest seabirds, the storm petrel is not found on any island with mammalian predators.



Only 120 shore plovers remain, all living on Rangatira, although they once occurred on mainland New Zealand. An easy prey for predators, the colourful shore plover had disappeared from New Zealand by the latter half of the 19th century.

Photo: Alison Davis