

The extensive rocky shore is important, not only for the shore plover but also for the Pitt Island shag and Chatham Island oystercatcher. Of 50 surviving oystercatchers, half are on Rangatira and it appears that only these birds are breeding successfully.

Scurrying and jumping insects

Pitt Islanders are familiar with the large, hairy spiders of Rangatira, but not so well known are the island's unusual insects.

Of particular interest are several large flightless insects — a weevil and click beetle. Because the weevil lives on the endangered Chatham Island speargrass (*Aciphylla dieffenbachii*), its survival is in doubt. At night, the forest floor is alive with scurrying cockroaches, beetles and jumping wetas. The two species of weta present differ from their mainland counterparts as they are cave wetas.

On warm, sunny days the brightly coloured Chatham Island red admiral butterfly flits among the muehlenbeckia and bracken.

The Chatham Island skink is common in tangled vegetation. It can be seen and heard scurrying through the leaves when one passes by.

Our "Cook's tour" of the wildlife of the island finishes up on its southern shores, where the largest colony of fur seals in the Chathams is found. In the summer months bulls guard harems of females whose pups bask and play in the sun.

Gnarled forest trees

The Chatham Island forests are unique, with most of the forest trees endemic.

On Rangatira the gnarled akeake trees (*Olearia traversii*) grow on the exposed coastal niches, while *Mysine chathamica* and Chatham Island lancewood and ribbonwood flourish in more sheltered areas. During summer droughts the ribbonwood trees lose their leaves. Such semi-deciduous ribbonwood forests are unusual in New Zealand.

Most of the south coast is salt meadow, which is regularly showered with salt spray during strong southerly winds. In spring, the meadow is a sea of pink iceplant flowers, with splashes of yellow, white and purple from *Cotula*, sea primrose, cress, the creeping *Hebe chathamica*, and Chatham Island geranium.

Away from the salt spray *Poa chathamica* and *Carex trifida* form a dense tussock sward in exposed places. Scattered among this are the endangered speargrass *Aciphylla dieffenbachii*, the giant nettle (*Urtica australis*) and the spectacular Chatham Island forget-me-not. These giant herbs are also found on the steep cliffs and summit with the purple-flowered *Olearia chathamica* and *Hebe dieffenbachii* scrub.



Hold breath and hope

Botanist David Bellamy, in the foreword to the recently published book, *Black Robin Country*, writes in reference to the black robin that "New Zealand holds her breath in hope."

The same can be said of Rangatira Island. The greatest threat to it is the accidental introduction of rats. If these vermin arrive we would certainly lose the New Zealand shore plover, the black robin, snipe, the Chatham Island oystercatcher and petrel, along with millions of seabirds, the skink and many rare invertebrates.

To quote David Bellamy, if all these animals become extinct, it will indeed be a black day. "And so the world waits with baited breath..."



The Chatham Island red admiral butterfly (*Vanessa gonerilla ida*) is a colourful sight on sunny days on the island.

Photo: G. W. Gibbs

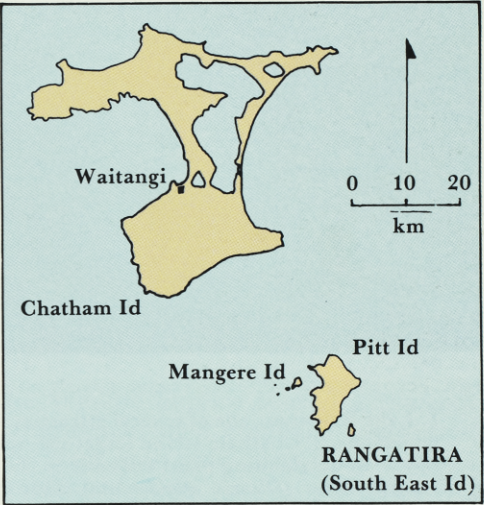


Fig 1: Map of Chatham Island and other main islands.

Like its mainland relative, the spotted shag, the Pitt Island shag builds a nest of ice plant, grass and other plants in eroded pockets or on cliff edges.

Photo: Mark Bellingham

The southern tablelands of main Chatham Island, a unique biological area with a mosaic of bogs, forest, lakes and scrub, is under possible threat from a huge peat mining proposal. Fletcher Challenge has recently been granted four prospecting licences to assess the viability of a scheme which could replace up to 45 percent of imported crude oil products. Not only are conservation interests at risk; the social fabric of the Chathams would be seriously affected with the arrival of more than 2000 project staff — overwhelming the Chathams population of 750. See pictorial on page 16.