

Blue penguins

becoming island refugees

IN THE EYES of children, nothing can beat the cute, waddling, somewhat comical appearance of a penguin. But just thinking that penguins are cute has done nothing to stop the decline of the one penguin species that is accessible to all New Zealanders. Unlike the penguins commonly thought of, it is not confined to the Antarctic or some remote sub-antarctic island. The blue penguin occurs in more northerly latitudes and agreeable climates and it is the only species that breeds widely throughout New Zealand.



ALAN TENNYSON

A blue penguin on Rangatira (South East Island) in the Chathams. There are several large colonies of blue penguins in the Chatham Islands yet the populations of mainland colonies are in serious decline.

In Australia more tourists visit Victoria's Phillip Island blue penguin colony than the Great Barrier Reef, yet New Zealanders pay little attention to these endearing penguins, which nest close to most of our main cities. Many mainland New Zealand colonies are being wiped out by continuing threats from predation, set nets, cars, human persecution and habitat destruction. Alan Tennyson describes how we need to act quickly if we want to save the dwindling mainland colonies.

Unfortunately, it is this liking of warmer waters that has led to its demise, because wherever it has come in contact with humans it has suffered.

Australians Colin Stahel and Rosemary Gales wrote in their 1987 book on blue penguins:

"There are very few, if any, cases where the close proximity of human habitation has not resulted in either a decline in [blue] penguin breeding numbers or their complete disappearance from the area."

While their yellow-eyed cousins have become media mega-stars (and deservedly so), most people seem to be unaware of