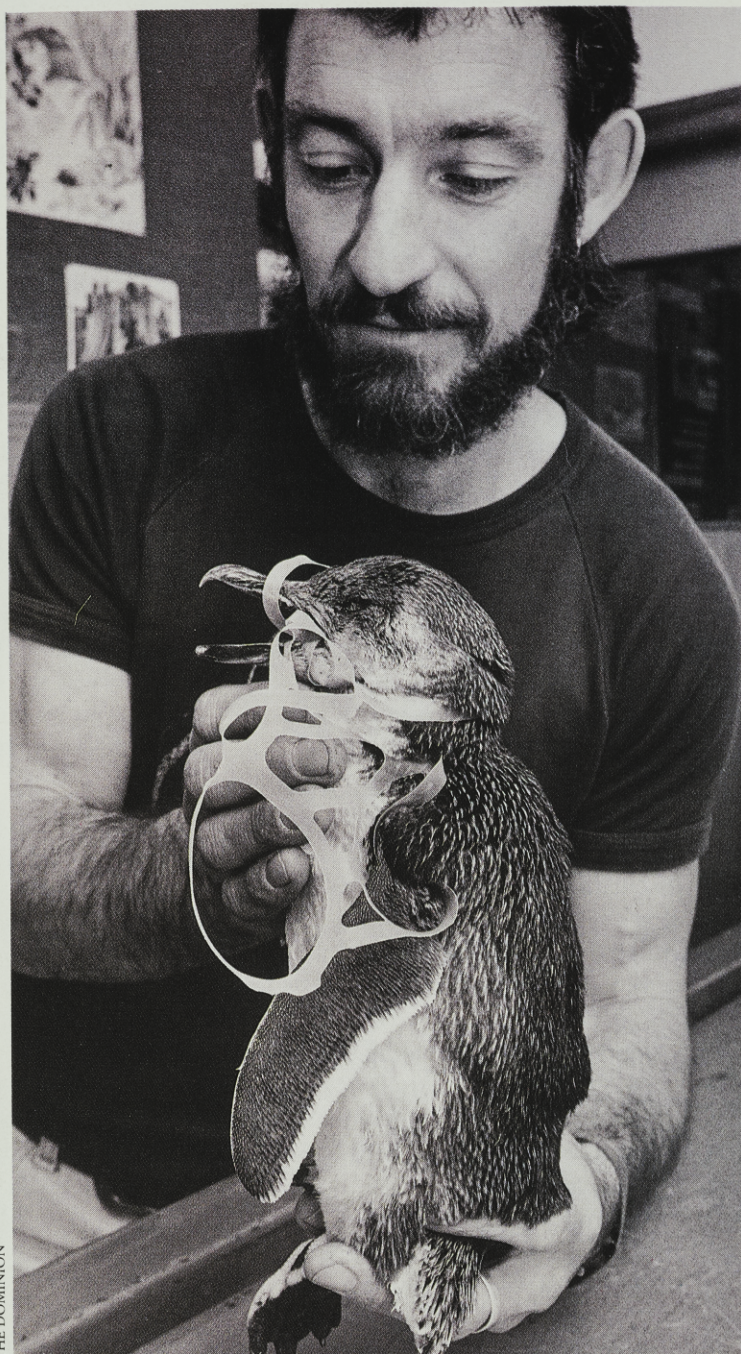




The distribution of blue penguins in New Zealand. They are also found around the southern half of Australia.

Blue penguins are commonly the victims of discarded plastic or waste oil. Here DoC scientist Geoff Walls with a penguin that died from entanglement in a six-pack holder.



THE DOMINION

dog predation has been recorded for several years, including 15 deaths in December 1990, eight killed in one night in July 1991 and a further five in late September. This part of the colony was thought to number about 70 in 1990 but must now be heading for rapid extinction.

At Piha Beach on Auckland's west coast, residents tried for years to get the local council to control dogs in the area. The dog predation problem increased in the late 1980s with 30 penguin deaths recorded in two years and the colony was reportedly wiped out by 1990.

Introduced cats, ferrets and, in Australia, foxes and dingos, are also known to kill large numbers of blue penguins at their colonies. Cats killed about 20 blue penguins in only three days in one instance at Wedge Island, Tasmania. Ferrets have killed up to 90 percent of chicks and 5 percent of adults on Banks Peninsula colonies in a season. As a result, some colonies on the peninsula have disap-

peared in recent years and others are much depleted.

Penguins are frequent victims of set nets. The numbers of penguins drowned will remain a mystery while set netting goes largely unmonitored. It is certain that many more blue penguins drown in set nets than are reported. Nevertheless, Forest and Bird has compiled records of blue penguin drownings in the Bay of Plenty, Taranaki, Wellington, Nelson, Marlborough, Kaikoura, Canterbury and Otago. The worst reported incident involving this species is of 16 white-flipped penguins caught off Motunau Island in December 1985. They also drown in gill nets off Australia.

Blue penguins have also drowned in box-nets – a fishing method used briefly in New Zealand before it proved uneconomic.

The decrease in food supplies is another problem. In some years huge numbers of blue penguins, particularly fledglings, will die and beaches can be

littered with corpses. The Ornithological Society's "beach patrol" scheme normally records 300–1,000 dead blue penguins washed up on New Zealand's coast each year. Nearly 5,400 were found in 1985, and 3,729 were recorded from north-eastern North Island coasts in 1974. Such mortalities are thought to be "natural" events caused by a collapse in numbers of prey species.

Human over-fishing of penguin prey species, such as pilchards and anchovies, is likely to increase the number of such mass die-offs. New Zealand fish stocks are only managed on a species by species basis, rather than an ecosystem basis, which means the penguin's entire food supply could be removed without any consideration of its effect on the penguin.

For blue penguins nesting near human habitation, cars can be a big problem. A human preference for waterfront roads and sub-divisions has often led to a deadly strip of asphalt being built between penguins' traditional nest sites and the sea. In