

Who will save the dotterel

ANOTHER ENDEMIC IN TROUBLE

In the past few years, public awareness of the plight of the New Zealand dotterel has grown considerably. Many protection programmes now operate each season at important breeding sites in the North Island and these are resulting in more chicks fledging. But there are two distinct populations facing different problems. JOHN DOWDING reports his alarming findings about the dramatic decline of the Stewart Island dotterels while ANDREW CUMMING, PETER JENKINS AND JOHN HAY describe their recent research on the northern population.

RECORDS from the mid-19th century show us that New Zealand dotterels (*Charadrius obscurus*) were widespread through out the country; in particular they seem to have been common in the South Island, breeding on the braided river beds and in the Southern Alps, then forming winter flocks on the east coast.

Maori knew the birds as tuturiwhatu pukunui, referring to their plump bellies and sedate habits, although there is little evidence in middens of extensive hunt-

ing. In the last hundred years the species has declined steadily in range and numbers and there are now two populations, apparently isolated from one another and separated by more than 1,000 km.

The total population is currently less than 1,500 individuals. About 95 percent of these are found on the coast of the North Island but a few still survive on Stewart Island. The exact reasons for their disappearance from the South Island are hard to determine now, but it seems likely that introduced predators played a significant part.

Early miners, sealers and whalers preferred larger birds such as kaka, kakapo, pigeon and ducks, although dotterels were considered a delicacy by early settlers in Canterbury and Otago.

JOHN DOWDING



Possibly because of Stewart Island's isolation, there has been very little work on the species there and few clues are available to the size of the island's dotterel population in the past. In 1955 Ross McKenzie of the Ornithological Society, who was studying the species in the North Island, paid a brief visit to Stewart Island. He counted a single flock of more than 218 birds and for over 30 years the few population estimates published were based on that figure. The size of the flock, far larger than any remaining in the

The remote flock site at the western end of Cooks Arm lies in the shadow of Gog and Magog, among the spectacular granite landscape of southern Stewart Island. In 1969 there were at least 40 birds in the flock here – this year just three are left.

JOHN DOWDING