

Birds which nest at Christmas-time are often victims of unwitting holidaymakers, reports GORDON ELL.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GEOFF MOON

Victims

Rare and endangered New Zealand birds are among the victims of the traditional New Zealand love for the seaside. The birds nest about the tideline just when most New Zealanders flock to the beach around Christmas.

Consequently, populations of birds such as the New Zealand dotterel and the variable oystercatcher — classified respectively as 'threatened' and 'rare' — are diminishing with each successive summer. Some of this population collapse is due to the depredations of wild animals — hedgehogs are the worst predators, along with black-backed gulls, feral cats, stoats and ferrets.

Summertime holidaymakers disturb nesting birds and their young. At left, a nesting colony of white-fronted terns still has young to feed at Christmas. Numbers of the 'threatened' New Zealand dotterel (top) and 'rare' variable oystercatcher (below) are heavily affected by human disturbance.

Increasingly, however, it is the pressure of people on beaches which is destroying nesting areas and habitat. Burgeoning settlement of coastal areas has brought increased beach traffic to many parts of our coast, particularly in the north where the mainland population of New Zealand dotterel lives.

The variable oystercatcher, (usually black, in contrast with its pied cousin), occurs more widely around New Zealand but nests in almost exactly the same weeks when New Zealanders traditionally take their annual holiday. Careless feet, pet dogs, and vehicles on the beach, all take a toll of nests. Like the New Zealand or red-breasted dotterel, variable oystercatchers nest in a scoop of sand just above the high tideline, where most human traffic is concentrated. Fiercely territorial, each pair generally holds its own stretch of beach, often a small bay.

Anyone with a keen eye or a pair of

binoculars can soon locate the nesting site of these birds by watching their behaviour. They may feign injury to lead intruders away. Nests are not obvious, however, to the unthinking passerby, particularly if driving a 4WD or quad-bike along the beach to a favoured fishing site. Even the careful footsteps of the curious observer may mark a way across the sand for some predator. The chicks of both species of bird can run about the beach, like balls of animated fluff, from shortly after hatching but at holiday time they are very vulnerable.

For a decade or more, volunteers and people hired on work schemes have devoted time to protecting some of the most threatened breeding grounds at Christmas.

Forest and Bird signs at Buffalo Beach near Whitianga on the Coromandel Peninsula warn off people from a dotterel nesting site. Volunteers, like Dr Bruce Mackereth, protect such beach sites at many places in the north.



New Zealand dotterel

GEOFF MOON



Variable oystercatcher



MEG GRAEME