



Rare king shag spotted on Nelson coast

Nelson City Council recently carried out a coastal bird survey to gain a better understanding of significant habitats for coastal bird species on the Nelson coastline. The focus of the survey was on Variable Oystercatcher and Banded Dotterel, but the opportunity was taken to survey for other shore and coastal birds such as, gulls, terns and herons.

While the survey results are still being compiled, the unexpected discovery of a previously unknown king shag roost site on the coastline south of Cape Soucis has caused great excitement amongst the conservation community. The New Zealand king shag is endemic to New Zealand and were thought to be restricted to the outer Marlborough Sounds. About 50% of all existing birds are located at two colonies: Duffers Reef and Trio Islands.

The birds sighted included adults, first year birds and sub adults. Previously ornithologists had only recorded individual young birds close to Abel Tasman National Park. If the birds recorded are breeding it would be an important range extension for this species, and would be "most significant" according to king shag expert Rob Schuckard.

Survey leader Nikki McArthur noted that "this is the first and only communal king shag roost site recorded within Nelson City Council's Coastal Marine Area".

With the population at only around 800 birds, a range expansion for this species could help provide a more resilient population. With such a small population and restricted distribution this species is vulnerable to single adverse weather events so could also be affected by climate change and related adverse weather events.

According to Rob Schuckard, "King shag belongs to the Blue-eyed shags, of which the six New Zealand species have relatively small populations and are all classified as either "Threatened" or "At Risk". King shag predominantly occupy remote rocks in the outer Marlborough Sounds and about 50% of king shag breed and forage in the Pelorus Sound."

Researchers will monitor the roosting site for any breeding behaviour over the winter months, to see if the birds are establishing a colony there.

Small is beautiful – the New Zealand Fungus Gnat

While they may have a name like a bad cartoon character, fungus gnats play a key role in the New Zealand forest ecosystem.

These tiny fliers, members of the Diptera group, feed on fungus and then provide food for native birds and lizards. Forest fungi do a sterling job of converting decaying material from dead trees and plants into a food source for the gnats, which then go on to feed animals further up the food chain.

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) is currently running a research programme into *Mycetophila* fungus gnats (one of the most common groups of fungus gnat found in New Zealand, with around 50 endemic species) to create a species identification guide so we can distinguish native *Mycetophila* from harmful exotic gnats that threaten our delicate ecosystems. *Mycetophila* also play a role in the pollination of spider orchids.

A recent fungus gnat trapping operation in Nelson found 20 species of *Mycetophila* in just one location. This information and the specimens collected will be used to inform the Te Papa study and broaden our knowledge of these tiny but important insects.



A small selection of *Mycetophila*. Photos by Julia Kasper, edited by Shaun Thompson. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

Environmental grants applications open in February

If you have a planting, weed control or other habitat restoration in mind, Nelson City Council may be able to help with an Environmental Grant.

Council's Environmental Grants Scheme supports projects that improve the health of Nelson's natural environment. There are two funding rounds in any financial year; applications for the February 2021 funding round open on Monday 1 February and close on Friday 26 February. Funding is available to support groups and individuals with projects that help achieve the following goals:

- Protect existing native biodiversity on private and public land (e.g. weeding, planting, fencing, possum and goat control).
- Restore connections between native ecosystems (e.g. native planting to connect or extend fragmented ecosystems).
- Enhance native wildlife through restoring habitat or predator control (e.g. native planting, community trapping projects on private and public land).
- Restore riparian margins – the land on the banks of waterways.
- Reduce sediment or contaminants into freshwater.
- Reduce erosion on farming and forestry land.

For more information go to nelson.govt.nz/environmental-grants-scheme, email nelson.nature@ncc.govt.nz or call us on 03 546 0200.

nelson.govt.nz/environmental-grants-scheme