

THE AMERICAN BIOLOGY TEACHER



About Our Cover

The variable oystercatcher (*Haematopus unicolor*) is an endemic New Zealand bird. It is now reasonably common over much of the country, but that was not always the case. Until the 1920s, oystercatchers were shot for food and their numbers had declined precipitously. Now protected, they have rebounded to ~5000 individuals, but their status is still considered “recovering.” Two-thirds of the population is on the North Island, but these individuals were photographed in a rugged scenic area called the “Catlins,” in the extreme southeast of the South Island at Curio Bay.

Called “variable” because of the color morphs found throughout New Zealand, all are considered members of the same species. They have a long bright orange bill (longer in females) and coral-colored legs. Almost exclusive to the coasts, they can live to be 30+ years of age. They breed in monogamous pairs, mostly in sandy areas, and lay two or three eggs at a time.

As their name implies, these birds eat mollusks, prying the shell open with their bills by twisting and hammering, but their diet also includes crustaceans, worms, and small fish. Variable oystercatchers feed their young, which are hidden among rocks or under vegetation.

This information has been adapted from the informative and well-organized website “New Zealand Birds Online” (<http://nzbirdsonline.org.nz>). The photographer is William F. McComas, Parks Family Professor of Science Education at the University of Arkansas College of Education and Health Professions (mccomas@uark.edu) and Editor of *The American Biology Teacher*.

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