

Fiordland crested penguin/ tawaki



The Fiordland crested penguin/tawaki is one of three penguin species that breed on New Zealand's mainland. It is only found in New Zealand, and is one of the rarest penguins in the world – they are Nationally Endangered with just 2,500–3,000 breeding pairs left.

Its breeding range extends along the coast south of Bruce Bay in South Westland, Fiordland and includes Stewart Island/Rakiura.

Where to see tawaki

Monro Beach, near Lake Moeraki 30 km north of Haast, is the most accessible place. A walking track, well signposted off State Highway 6, leads from Lake Moeraki to the beach.

The best time to see tawaki is during the breeding season (July to November). They may also occasionally be seen during the moulting season (mid-January to early March).

Tawaki are active at any time of day. You have a much greater chance of seeing them if you sit quietly and wait rather than moving around.

Remember to keep your distance and your dogs under control – Fiordland crested penguins are timid and sensitive to disturbances. They may flee, causing moulting penguins to starve or leaving eggs/chicks vulnerable to predators.

Threats

Humans – tawaki are timid. If they hear noise or see movement on the beach they will not leave their nesting spots or come in from the sea. Moulting birds can starve or eggs/chicks can be left vulnerable to predators.

Dogs – even small or mild-mannered dogs can injure or kill penguins. A single dog has the potential to wipe out an entire colony.

Stoats – prey on chicks and sick or injured adults.



Photo: © Janice McKenna

Did you know?

Adults stand about 60 cm high, weigh up to 4 kg and reach breeding maturity at 5- to 6-years-old. They have distinctive broad yellow eyebrow stripes that splay out and droop down the back of their neck.

Like other birds, they don't have teeth! Their tongues have fleshy backwards pointing spines to hold slippery prey, which they swallow whole.

Tawaki are monogamous; they separate when not breeding but return to the same beach to find their mate.

Females lay two white eggs. The first is usually smaller, an 'insurance policy' in case the second egg doesn't survive. Most first eggs fail to hatch or the chicks die of starvation within 10 days of hatching.

Both parents take turns incubating the eggs for 30–35 days. After hatching, chicks are guarded by the male and fed by the female for the first 3 weeks. The chicks then form small crèches and are left unattended for long periods while both parents are at sea foraging for food.

By late November – early December chicks are independent. The chicks and adults all leave the colony and head out to sea to fatten up for the moulting season.

From mid-January tawaki head back to shore to begin their moult, which lasts for about 4 weeks and is stressful for the birds. They lose their waterproof insulating coat so can't go into the sea to feed, and lose up to half of their body weight! They can look sick, and the lack of food can make them disorientated so they are vulnerable to predators and can wander to strange places like the road.

How you can help

Keep dogs under control and below the high tide mark – well away from penguin colonies. Do not let dogs roam.

Don't walk near penguins and their nesting sites – stay well below the high tide mark.

Do not leave old fishing line on beaches or throw it into the sea – penguins get tangled and can drown.

Report any penguin sightings to the local DOC office – and ask professional advice before disturbing a bird, even if you think it is sick; usually the birds are just moulting.



andrewwalmsleyphotography.com

Under the Conservation Act of 1987, it is an offence if your dog harms or kills any protected wildlife. You may face up to 12 months imprisonment and/or a \$10,000 fine, and your dog could be destroyed.