

# SHOREBIRD STORIES THE STILTS

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Up until the 1840's the only stilts in NZ were black stilts or kaki. They were very common and found all over NZ in a number of different habitats.

We think that they migrated from Australia many thousands of years ago. In the beginning they were very similar in appearance to the pied stilt/poaka that is common in NZ today.

We cannot be sure just why kaki became black in colour. We do know that black plumage turns more of the sun's light into heat. This would have been very useful during an ice age, increasing the chances of survival. The last ice age finished over 10,000 years ago but it did last for 70-80,000 years. Perhaps kaki lived through one or more ice ages and **evolved** from pied (black and white) to black.



Keith Woodley watercolour

Coming from Australia those initial birds would have been very wary of mammalian predators. Over many thousands of years this wariness was lost, because there were no mammalian predators in NZ.



The arrival of man and his cats, rats and other mammalian predators pushed the unwary kaki to the brink of extinction. By 1900 no kaki could be found in the North Island. By 1980 they were breeding in just one location, the McKenzie Country of the South Island.

The McKenzie country is plagued by rabbits and this can be good for kaki. The predators would rather eat rabbits than stilt. When the farmers shoot or poison the rabbits the hungry predators look for other food. This has not been good for the kaki.

At the same time new drainage and power schemes reduced the **habitat** for kaki.

Pied stilts arrived in NZ from Australia again around 1840, this also weakened the kaki's chances of survival. They weren't so very different from the kaki. They were able to live in most of the habitats that kaki did. Their big advantage was that they were predator wary. They could take over and breed successfully in the habitats that kaki had lost because of predation



Keith Woodley watercolour.

Like most solitary nesting birds kaki are territorial. A male returns to his territory each year. If his mate is not there and there is no other female kaki available then he will mate with a pied stilt/poaka.



Crosses do occur between many species and they produce **hybrids**. A liger is a hybrid between a lion and a tiger. Hybrids are usually **sterile**. They are unable to produce young.

Hybrids between kaki and poaka are not sterile. They are fertile. They can have young. These young, when grown prefer to mate with kaki but a mate is not often available. As a result there are a range of hybrids with differing looks and not so many pure bred kaki.



There are three mature poaka on the left and one kaki on the right. The other birds are mature hybrids. Confusingly young kaki have a lot of white plumage!

## CONSERVING KAKI

Kakis are the rarest shorebirds in the world. They are in the worst category of all, **critically endangered**. In 1981 a management programme was set up to save the species. At this time there were only 20 of them in the world. To prevent hybridisation selected pairs were put into individual aviaries to breed. This is known as **captive breeding**. Their breeding is carefully managed.

Kakis are like most shorebirds. They can produce up to four eggs per nest. It is possible to take these eggs away from the parents and give them to a pair of pied stilts to incubate and care for. The kaki pair can then make another clutch.

A single pair of kaki can produce several clutches of eggs in a breeding season. Many young have been produced over the years but the species has not been saved. Many of the young birds that are released into the wild are not seen again.

In February 2014 there were 131 adults and 20 juvenile birds. This is a great improvement on 1981.

**The kaki remains the rarest shorebird in the world.**

## EXTRA INFORMATION BELOW

[www.nzbirdsonline.org.nz/species/black-stilt](http://www.nzbirdsonline.org.nz/species/black-stilt)

<https://www.nzonscreen.com/title/the-black-stilt-1983>

The *Black Stilt* - This film tells the story of the world's rarest wading bird, the *black stilt* (kakī). ... An early doco for TVNZ's Natural History Unit, the magnificently filmed drama of the stilt's struggle for survival makes it "stand out."

<http://www.doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/places-to-go/canterbury/places/twizel-area/kaki-black-stilt-visitor-hide/>





Hybrid stilt and youngster at Pukorokoro Miranda.



Pied stilts in the stilt ponds, Pukorokoro Miranda.