



Title: “Hey! What’s that?”

Description: King shags in Queen Charlotte’s Sound

Photographer: Noelle Bennett

Where, when: Ruakaka Bay, Queen Charlotte’s Sound. July 2018

Sustainability: The New Zealand King shag is an “endemic” species i.e. it only occurs in New Zealand. Also, it is found only in the Marlborough Sounds, a situation that has not changed in over 240 years. Restricted distribution makes a species more vulnerable because if anything were to happen in that place, the species might suffer. It’s a conservation equivalent of “not having all your eggs in one basket”.

King shags are difficult to study, in part because of their sensitivity to disturbance, but also because of the relative inaccessibility of their breeding sites which generally can only be accessed by boat. In an aerial assessment carried out in 2015 it was estimated that there were only about 839 birds, including just 187 breeding pairs. A follow-up breeding survey in 2016 suggested there had been a decline in active breeding pairs which was in excess of 37%. There is some uncertainty as to whether all adult birds are active annual breeders because such relatively small numbers of pairs seem to attempt to breed.

Given all these factors, King shags seem to be exceptionally vulnerable to a single adverse event. Exposure to a run of severe southerly storms in June 2015 was responsible for the loss of 58% of nests from White Rocks, one of the five main colonies. Conservation ecologists strive to maintain populations above the “Minimum Viable Population size, where such “ecological catastrophes” (like that bad run of storms) cannot snuff out the local population.

In more recent times I have myself noticed a huge increase in recreational boating and fishing in many parts of the Sounds. Given the King shags’ vulnerability to disturbance and declining fish stocks, these beautiful birds may be under even more pressure in future.

Photographer’s notes: These are really magnificent birds that are rarely seen although a little research narrows down the best areas to look for them. The only way to see King shags is by boat. So I guess that makes our lifestyle the perfect one for seeing these creatures, living, as we do, on a yacht. They tend to prefer to inhabit rocky areas and especially rocky plateaus and ridges ranging between 2metres and 33metres above sea level which does make them slightly easier to photograph. However, photographing from a boat in itself represents a bit of a challenge because of the constant movement. Even when the weather is being reasonably kind there is likely to be a swell running - albeit a slight one - so it is virtually impossible to escape the movement.

The most helpful tips I can offer is to make sure you have a lens with a good reach (rocks and boats don’t go

together particularly well!) and that you make sure your shutter speed is fast enough to allow for the random movement of the boat. Apart from that you just need a fair bit of patience...but the potential results are well worth all the effort. I think you'd have to agree, these birds are pretty special.

Photo specs: This image is a composite but is produced from one single image which has been used multiple times with differing effects applied to each iteration. Technical specs: The image was taken using a Panasonic DC-G9 camera and a Panasonic Leica DG 100-400mm f/4-6.3 ASPH lens. Exposure details - 1/1600 sec at f5.8 with an ISO 200 and a focal length of 250mm (500mm full frame equivalent)

Digital specs: 7061 x 5393 pixels (38.08MP) @ 300dpi

Key words: birds, shags, cormorant, king shag, endemic, endangered, Marlborough Sounds, seabird, caruncle, Minimum Viable Population size, ecological catastrophes, Noelle Bennett, Ecosystems Photography, sustainability.

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We recommend that the donation goes to *The Wildlife Hospital*, Dunedin because of the amazing work they do, treating a wide variety of native species, including parrots, penguins, reptiles, and sea lions. The hospital is important to the survival of so many of our beautiful native creatures

Image ref: NB#001 (please use this reference in all orders and correspondence).

Noelle Bennett
5 December 2021