



Title: 'A different perspective'

Description: A tūi at Orokonui

Photographer's name: Noelle Bennett

Where and when: Orokonui Ecosanctuary, Dunedin. December 2017.

Sustainability: These fabulously boisterous birds are the real characters of the avian world. They're common and widespread throughout New Zealand, unless you live in Canterbury. They're equally at home in forests as in suburbia. Although they appear black from a distance, a closer look reveals a beautiful blue, green and bronze iridescent sheen to their feathers. And then, of course, there is that wonderful and distinctive poi - the white throat tufts.

Despite the loss of the vast majority of lowland forest from New Zealand, tūi have almost certainly benefitted from the introduction of so many exotic flowering plants and trees which, together with sugar water feeders in gardens, means there is a reliable year-round supply of fruit and nectar for them. They play a very important role in the dynamics of New Zealand's forests because they are one of the most common pollinators of flowering plants, and also disperse the seeds of trees with medium-sized fruits.

Courtesy of its dual voicebox, the tūi has hundreds of sounds at its disposal making it a master of mimicry. Car alarms, beeps, whistles and even the sound of shattering glass, the tūi can recreate them all. And if you watch them really carefully you might sometimes notice that they seem to huff and hunch in silence between chord progressions, as if trying to find new notes from within itself before once again breaking back into song. This is when the tūi reaches ultra-sonic notes and, for those few seconds, sings a melody that humans are unable to hear.

Whatever else, these beautiful birds seem to have been able to use their intelligence to adapt and thrive in spite of the triple whammy of deforestation, colonisation and predator invasion. Their adaptability is probably partly a result of extreme mobility – they can range over 50 km and “pick the eyes” out of the ecological landscape. They are also “dominant”, so they can bully the smaller bird species away from a food source. When scrapping over food, tūi beat male bellbirds, who displace female bellbirds, who in turn can see off most silvereyes. A few of the more confident (or is that more desperate?) silvereyes will stand their ground against a female bellbird.

These “dominance hierarchies” are clues about ecological competition for resources – it's survival of the fittest out there. The same competition occurs within a species. For example, you may have noticed that some tūi fly very noisily, and others are nearly silent. There is a small ‘wing slot’ (indentation) in the primary wing feathers. Dominant males orientate those feathers to make a lot of flurrying noise when flying to frighten off their competitors – the subordinate males turn off their wing noise to stay unnoticed – that's not so different from bullies and runts in human society then?

Photographer's notes: Think of tūī and you tend to think of those archetypal images with a beautifully colourful tūī contrasting so fantastically with the gloriously coloured flowers of a harakeke (flax, Phormium) as it delicately extracts nectar from the flowers. And although I love those images, there was just something special about this one as the tūī gripped onto the bark of the tree he was monopolising. He stared straight at me as if trying to work out what the strange being was that was looking at him (or her). I'm not sure he ever did work out what the strange being was!

Photo specs: This image is a composite produced from one single image which has been used multiple times with differing effects applied to each iteration to provide a more aesthetically pleasing end result. Technical specs: The image was taken using a Panasonic DMC-GH4 camera and a Panasonic Leica DG 100-400mm f/4-6.3 ASPH lens. Exposure details - 1/100 sec at f5.7 with an ISO of 800 and a focal length of 195mm (390mm full frame equivalent).

Digital specs: 7113 x 5777 pixels (41.09MP) @ 300dpi

Key words: birds, tūī, endemic, Orokonui, adaptability, competition, dominance hierachy, Noelle Bennett, Ecosystems Photography, sustainability.

Price: \$300 (incl. GST) for use of the digital image. Visit www.ecosystemsphotography/sales for details & to order, or to get a quote if you would like a high-quality print.

Donation: The price includes a \$100 donation to a sustainability organisation or project of your choice, or otherwise to the Orokonui Ecosanctuary <https://orokonui.nz/>.

I recommend that the donation goes to *Orokonui Ecosanctuary* to support their ecosystem restoration work where this image was taken. Their predator-proof fence is building local bird populations to the point where the birds are spilling out into the surrounding landscape – the so-called “Halo effect”.

Image ref: NB#009 (please use this reference in all orders and correspondence).

Noelle Bennett
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