

# PLUMAGES OF VARIABLE OYSTERCATCHERS

By R. H. D. STIDOLPH

Observations on the plumage of Variable Oystercatchers (*Haematopus unicolor*) on the east, south and west coasts of the Wellington district north to the Rangitikei River mouth in the west and to the Hawkes Bay boundary in the east show, based on records over the past 42 years, that black birds are much more dominant in the Wairarapa East Coast than on the Manawatu West Coast. Moreover, an analysis of the plumages of 50 birds of intermediate form shows that just over half are almost black and only 13 almost pied.

The Wairarapa East and South Coasts are largely rocky with restricted shingle or sandy beaches whereas the West Coast in the area from Paekakariki to the Rangitikei River mouth is sandy without any rocks.

Classified as black, intermediate and pied, the figures are:

## WAIRARAPA EAST COAST (Flat Point to Mataikona)

1931 - 1973	Black	Intermediate	Pied
Flat Point	11	1	0
Riversdale	21	5	1
Orui	1	1	0
Whakataki	14	0	0
Mataikona	7	1	0
Totals	54	8	1

## WAIRARAPA SOUTH COAST (Palliser Bay)

1931 - 1973	Black	Intermediate	Pied
Cape Palliser	2	1	[2 undetermined]
Onoke Spit	6	0	0
Totals	8	1	[0]

## MANAWATU WEST COAST (Waikanae to Rangitikei River)

1931 - 1973	Black	Intermediate	Pied
Waikanae	4	0	0
Waikawa	3	3	4
Ohau	36	12	1
Hokio	1	1	0
Manawatu	29	35	5
Rangitikei	1	1	1
Totals	74	52	11

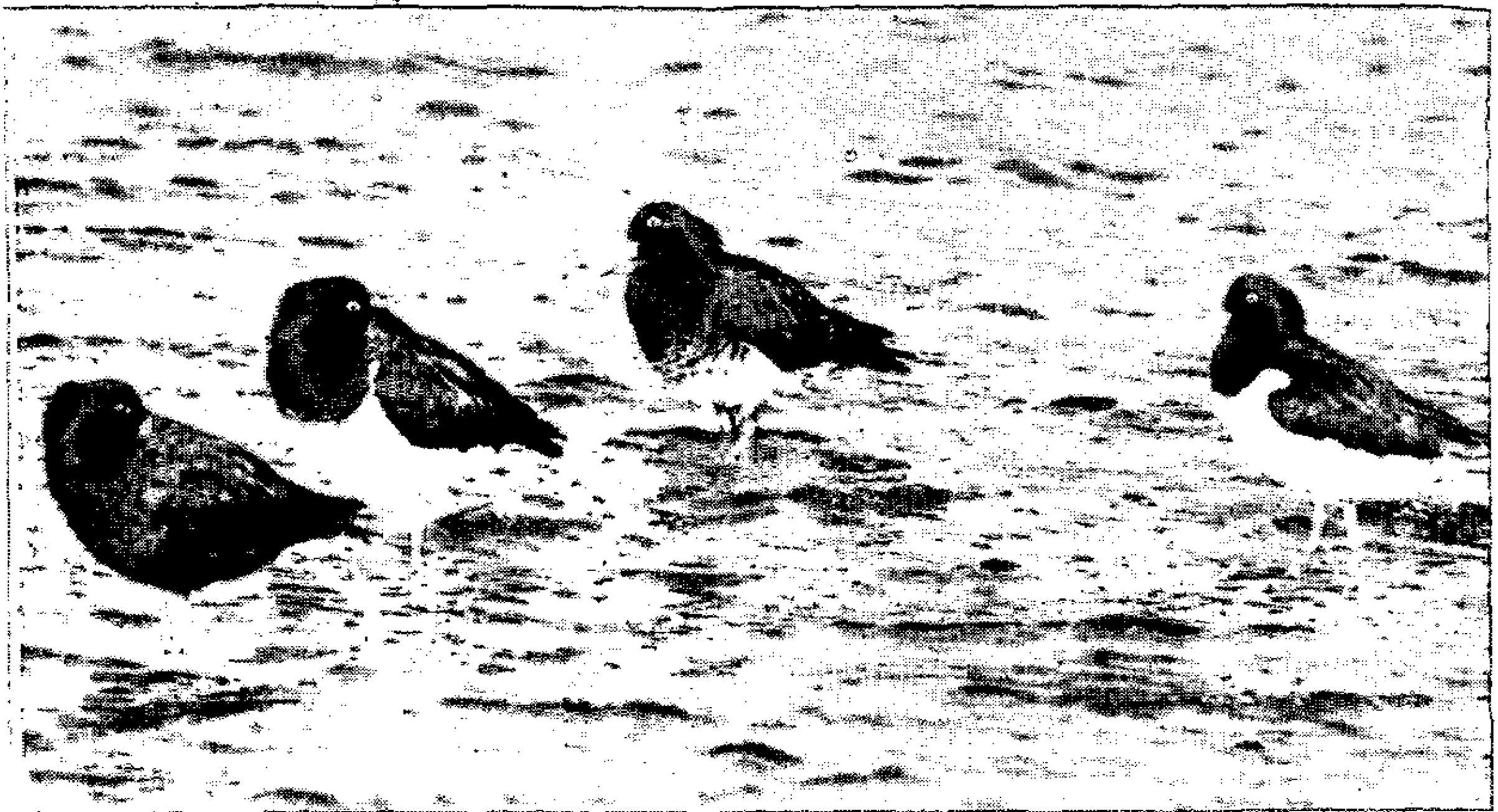


FIGURE 1 — Oystercatchers at Paremata, Wellington west coast, 23 July 1973, showing plumage differences between Variable and South Island Pied Oystercatchers (often colloquially referred to as "SIPO"). From left, black form of Variable (*Haematopus unicolor unicolor*), SIPO (*H. ostralegus finschi*), pied form of Variable (*H. unicolor reischeki*) with smudgy breast line, and SIPO. Note the clear line of demarcation on breast of SIPO and the white "shoulders."

Photo: S. Pownceby



FIGURE 2 — Part of a flock of 31 SIPO with a black Variable. Note the conspicuous white "shoulders" in both side and front views of the SIPO.

Photo: S. Pownceby.

An analysis of 50 birds of intermediate plumage from all areas shows 26 almost black, 11 others far more black than pied, 2 well pied on breast but with black rumps and 11 more pied than black. Details are:

ALMOST BLACK (all with black rump)

Few white feathers on vent — 3

Whitish lower breast and vent — 9

Traces of white on wing in flight — 14

MORE BLACK THAN PIED

Very narrow or narrow wing stripe and white or whitish on vent, black rump — 10

Fairly wide wing stripe, whitish rump — 1

Well pied on breast, narrow wing stripe but with black rump — 2

ALMOST PIED (all with restricted or ill-defined white rump)

Few white feathers on breasts, narrow wing stripe — 1

More white on breast, narrow wing stripe — 3

More or less pied, ill-defined white rump — 7

I am indebted to Mr S. Pownceby for the accompanying photographs of oystercatchers (Figs 1 and 2).

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