

## SHORT NOTE

### Avian pox in Variable Oystercatcher chick

Between Wharekaho and Ohuka Beaches, Mercury Bay, Coromandel Peninsula, there is a stretch of rocky coast which has provided breeding territories for three pairs of Variable Oystercatchers (*Haematopus unicolor*). Whenever opportunity allowed and the tide was out, I scrambled round in running gear to monitor progress. One pair of alert defenders defeated my search on 6 January 1992, but on 18 January I spotted a monochrome chick scuttling for cover. On 2 February, it ran into a crevice in the cliff where I could view it close up. There was extensive ulceration of its right face. I could not see the left face but on 12 February in the same crevice it was seen to be unaffected. On 18 February 1992 the chick seemed vigorous and flew 10 metres. There was a tumour on the right face with two peaks corresponding to the eyelids. On 4 March 1992 I found the chick dead 1 metre from the crevice, and no sign of the parents. As well as extensive destruction of the right face, extending to the base of the bill, there were several spherical encrusted brown skin tumours elsewhere. The most noticeable were three on the right wing.

Histological examination at Massey University showed "epidermal hyperplasia with ballooning degeneration and areas of necrosis. Eosinophilic intracytoplasmic inclusions (Bollinger bodies) seen in cutaneous epithelial cells. Some bacterial colonies also present." The diagnosis was avian pox virus.

The infection may not have been the sole cause of death. There had been a spell of bad weather and the day I found the dead chick I had swum out to a rock stack in the neighbouring territory to find that one of two healthy chicks, which had been flying for eight weeks, had disappeared.

I have not seen any evidence of avian pox at the high tide roost on the Whitianga Estuary, where I have the luxury of binoculars. El Nino has given us a vintage year for breeding success – no easterly storms. My best count was 7 juveniles and 28 adults on 25 May 1992.

I am grateful to Susan Cork of the Department of Veterinary Pathology and Public Health for the histological diagnosis, and I thank Phil Thomson of DoC, Hamilton, for arranging this examination.

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