

SHORT NOTE

New Zealand pigeon (kereru: *Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*) crossing Foveaux Strait

GRANT A. HARPER
53 Tweed St, Roslyn, Dunedin
strigops@xtra.co.nz

The New Zealand pigeon (kereru: *Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*) is known to travel 10s of kilometres, often between seasonal food sources (Clout *et al.* 1986; Clout *et al.* 1991). Pigeons have also been recorded flying substantial distances over the sea, such as 12 km from the Chickens Is to the North Is (Clout *et al.* 1995). I saw a single pigeon depart Little Barrier Is towards Leigh in Northland, a distance of c. 24 km. Similarly, pigeons have been seen flying to Great Barrier Is from Little Barrier Is, c. 16-17 km (Bell & Braithwaite 1963) and Centre Is (Rarotoka) towards Stewart Is (Higgins & Davies 1996).

On 16 Jan 2002 at 1130 h, while flying in a helicopter southwest over Foveaux Strait at 150 m asl from Invercargill to Codfish Is (Whenua Hou), I saw 4 pigeons flying south or southeast towards Stewart Is at our altitude. The approximate position of the sighting, 167° 55' 05"E, 46° 37' 50"S, determined by Global Positioning System in the helicopter, is shown in Fig 1. The weather was fine with light westerly winds and good visibility. The pigeons were sighted about 7.5 km from the nearest land, Black Rock Point on Stewart Is. The shortest distance across Foveaux Strait, on a 'back-bearing' of the pigeons' observed flight path (180° from True South or Southeast), is c. 32 km, from Black Rock Point to Oraka Point. The flight path and location of the pigeons suggests that they were flying from near Riverton, on the western Southland coast, to Stewart Is; if so, the pigeons had then flown at least 25 km over sea.

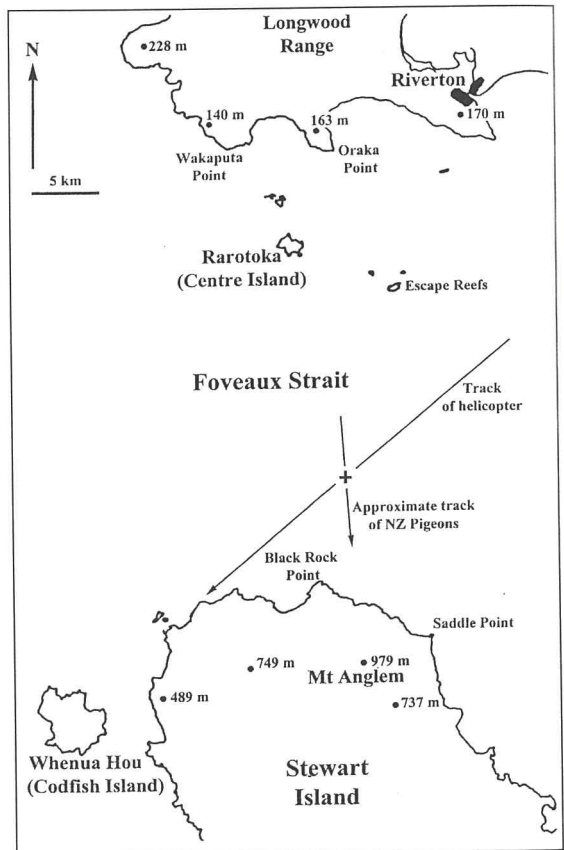


Fig 1. Location and approximate track of 4 New Zealand pigeons (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*) seen flying N-S over Foveaux Strait on 16 Jan 2002.

Pigeons make the return journey across Foveaux Strait too. Four or 5 pigeons were seen from a helicopter returning to Invercargill from Codfish Is, flying north at mid-Foveaux Strait at 0830 h on 26 Sep 2002 (G.P. Elliott pers. comm.). The wind at Invercargill airport at the time was a northerly 5 - 10 knots, and partly cloudy with good visibility (R. Marsden, New Zealand Meteorological Service, pers. comm.).

The probable 32 km path of these 2 pigeon flocks is the longest single flight yet recorded for New Zealand pigeons. However, this distance is not surprising given that fruit pigeons elsewhere are known to be strong fliers capable of flying >30 km over sea (Strong & Bancroft 1994; Schipper *et al.* 2001). By doing so they demonstrate their potential to disperse indigenous and exotic seeds across normal barriers, such as the sea, to seed dispersal.

These records demonstrate the ability of New Zealand pigeons to reach all islands near New Zealand's 3 "mainland" islands. However, the extreme flight range may be much greater, as indicated by their recent presence on Raoul Is, in the Kermadec Group, 900 km northeast of New Zealand (Worthy & Brassey 2000).

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