

National Royal Spoonbill Population Census, and Breeding Colony and Nest Count.

Royal spoonbill arrived naturally from Australia about 100 years ago, and now breed in New Zealand and are considered native. Birds New Zealand has been documenting the increase in the population of this new coloniser since the first nests were discovered at Okarito in 1949.

Another systematic, coordinated, full population census was done in winter, 2024, followed by locating colonies and counts of active nests during the 2024/2025 breeding season.

Every Birds NZ Region took part in the surveys. At least 500 locations were surveyed for the census and over 300 members were involved. The grand total of 4593 Royal Spoonbills was recorded, nearly double the number recorded at the previous census 12 years ago (2361). Most of the birds (86%) were found in the north of the North Island, confirming that this is their preferred area for over-wintering. The annual rate of growth is about 7.8%.

Thirty-six colonies were found compared with 17 in the 2013/2014 survey. There were 10 new colonies in the North Island and 8 new colonies in the South Island, so the Royal Spoonbill have extended their breeding range from Bluff to Huntly. The total number of confirmed nests was 470, which is fewer than a decade ago (632). Although the number of colonies has increased it appears that the number of nests at each colony was fewer (60% of colonies had less than 10 nests).

The findings have been presented in two articles in Birds New Zealand magazine. A scientific paper is being prepared for *Notornis*.

This survey was supported in part by a grant from the Project Assistance Fund to help offset transport costs, including hire of light aircraft for aerial surveys of colonies in Southland.

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Part of flock of 737 Royal Spoonbill roosting at Unahi, 9 July 2024 Image by Kevin Matthews.