

28. Muttonbird investigation

Aim

This activity enables students to consider the habitat and changing conditions of a bird that is commonly seen during the breeding season at several coastal parks. Students will become familiar with the requirements of the bird, and what conservation action is being undertaken to protect the species. It can be contrasted to the Rufous Bristlebird.

The concepts gained from investigating this species can be applied to other species.

Materials

- Resource sheet 28: Muttonbirds.
- Photocopy of a map of the world.
- Map of Australia.

Activities

1. Read the resource sheet on muttonbirds and complete the following.

Scientific Name:

Size:

Colour:

Call:

Nests:

Shelter:

Food:

2. Where do muttonbirds live?
Identify these locations on a map of Australia.

3. How endangered are muttonbirds?

4. Imagine you are a migratory bird, which means you travel long distances at certain times every year. On a map of the world, mark in blue the journey muttonbirds travel during the breeding season (October/November to March/April).

5. What activities, either natural or human, have led to a decline in muttonbird numbers?

6. What has been done to protect the muttonbird? What else do you think could be done to further protect the species?

Link to Section 4

See also Section 4 of this Parks Victoria education resource kit, in particular Port Campbell National Park where this bird is found.

28. Muttonbird

INTRODUCTION

The Muttonbird's more correct name is Short-tailed Shearwater (*Puffinus tenuirostris*). It is one of the greatest international travellers of the bird kingdom.

APPEARANCE AND HABITAT

The Muttonbird is a medium to large size bird (41-43 cm long), blackish-brown in colour, with a white mark under the eyes and a dull black bill.

All known breeding colonies of the muttonbird are found in Australia. These extend from St Francis Island, South Australia to southern Tasmania and northeast as far as Broughton Island in New South Wales.

The muttonbird prefers cool temperate waters. Its main food is krill, but it also eats cephalopods (e.g. squid and octopus) and small fish.

It has an evenly repeated 'kooka-rooka-rah' song, which is only heard on land. These birds are usually silent in flight and while at sea.

The muttonbird nests in sandy burrows. The female lays one egg annually, which is quite large for her body size. The newly hatched bird grows rapidly on regurgitated fish and krill from the parents' beaks.

MIGRATION PATTERNS

Muttonbirds are migratory, meaning that they move from one area to another at certain times of each year. During the breeding season, October to April, the birds form flocks in Bass Strait. They then fly on a very long journey. First they travel to New Zealand, then north to the Philippines, north again along Asian coastlines and past Japan, west across the north Pacific via the Aleutian Islands, down the west coast of North America then back across the Pacific on a long leg which bring them back to Australia. It is possible that many muttonbirds in their first year do not return to Australia but stay in the north.

USE BY HUMANS

Muttonbird chicks are harvested for flesh, oil (for pharmaceutical use) and feathers, in a small but well-established and tightly controlled industry that takes about 160,000 birds per year.

After the chicks are dragged from their burrows and killed, the bodies are plucked for their down, squeezed for the oil secreted in their stomach and then salted as a delicacy to eat. The industry was founded last century by sealers who turned to muttonbirds after the seals had been almost exterminated. Before this time mutton bird numbers had been extremely high as Aborigines did not eat or use them.

CONSERVATION STATUS

The species is currently regarded as abundant (found at all appropriate times in all appropriate habitats) and its status is secure (no existing or foreseeable threat to the continuance of the species)

The main alterations to their numbers come from human actions. In particular, oil spillage and encroachment on breeding grounds have affected the numbers of muttonbirds.