

New Zealand dabchick/ weweia

Photo: Shellie Evans

The New Zealand dabchick (*Poliocephalus rufopectus*) is endemic to this country, meaning it is found nowhere else in the world. This species is classified as Recovering, as the population is now increasing after a previous decline. However, it is estimated that fewer than 2,000 individuals remain, with the largest populations being found in the Central North Island, particularly around Rotorua's freshwater lakes.

Characteristics

Dabchicks are aquatic birds in the grebe family. They are generally silent, except for an occasional wee-ee-ee call, which gave rise to their Māori name 'weweia'. This bird is the size of a small duck, with a relatively long neck, yellow eyes, and fine, silvery feathers streaking the dark, glossy head.

Ecology

Dabchicks eat aquatic invertebrates and their larvae, which they peck from the water's surface or catch in mid-air. They can also dive for up to 30 seconds to feed on small freshwater fish, crayfish, shellfish and leeches.

Individuals start to pair up and build their floating nests near the shores of freshwater lakes and ponds from around July. These masses of vegetation are attached to emergent aquatic vegetation, such as reeds or raupō. Eggs are then generally laid between August and February, with successful nests containing 2-3 bluish eggs that later stain brown. Incubation takes around 22 days, after which both parents assist with the 70-day-long chick-rearing process.

Chicks are able to swim immediately after hatching, but tend to ride on their parents' backs for the first 3 weeks of life while they are still small and downy.



Photo: Ormond Torr



Photo: Jessica McKenna

Threats

Because dabchicks spend their whole lives in or on the water, they are very vulnerable to changes in water quality and lake levels, and human activity on the water – and even the loss of small numbers can have a large impact on the population.

A loss of natural habitat over time through drainage and land clearance has caused the dabchick population to become fragmented and likely contributed to the previous decline in numbers. However, artificial habitat, such as farm dams and stock water supplies, can provide suitable breeding habitat.

Dramatic changes in water levels or the wake created by boats and jet skis can easily swamp the floating nests of dabchicks on the edges of lakes or ponds. The eggs are also vulnerable to predation by Norway rats, which like to live near water and are good swimmers, as well as cats, mice, dogs and stoats, which also eat the birds.

Construction around lake edges (eg installing or upgrading a jetty) can have a serious impact on local dabchick populations as a result of increased activity, local sedimentation (which reduces the water quality), noise and local wave action, all of which can disrupt breeding.

Finally, netting in lakes and ponds can trap and drown dabchicks – a threat that is particularly important given the recent push to use netting to control catfish in the Rotorua Lakes.

How can I help to protect dabchicks?

- ▶ Keep rubbish and pollutants out of waterways and stormwater drains.
- ▶ Maintain a low boat/jetski speed near shore.
- ▶ Trap pests on your property.
- ▶ Prevent pets and domestic animals from disturbing wildlife.
- ▶ Plan to undertake any necessary shoreline construction work outside the breeding season (August–February).
- ▶ Obtain advice on safe netting methods in fresh water.
- ▶ Plant emergent aquatic vegetation around the edges of lakes or ponds on your property.

For information on pest-trapping techniques, safe netting methods, planting lists, and details of community groups that are working to support dabchick populations, contact:

Department of Conservation, email:
rotorua@doc.govt.nz.

Bay of Plenty Regional Council, phone:
0800 884 880 or email: info@boprc.govt.nz.

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