

March - Fledging season for Kaikoura's endangered Hutton's Shearwater/titi

For most of those birds crash landing, it is their first flight, ever.

They spend about 3 months in a dark burrow underground, being fed every day or two by a parent returning, but otherwise alone in a deep hole. (The parents can fly half way to the Chathams and back to find food, or as far south as Timaru, and bring back 50g of food to their chick.) The chicks get fat.

Then the parents stop coming.

The chicks get hungry.

They get lighter.

After a few days or weeks, the urge to find food overpowers the security of their burrow.

They emerge, at night, flap their wings for a few hours, then take flight.

On their first flight, they either find the ocean, or they die.

Most make it.

They have never seen rivers, trees, roads, ocean.

They can't see the ocean.

Often, they are taking off in thick cloud and they can't even see the mountains.

They are driven entirely by instinct.

Some sort of feeling that they need to go "that way".

There is nothing in their instincts to prepare them for roads or street lights or cars or people.

Is it any wonder they crash and appear confused?

Anything we can do to help - to get them to the ocean where their instincts have prepared them to survive - helps.

60 years ago, there were 10 wild colonies known, now there are only 2 remaining.

There isn't another bird like them on the planet, that nests in the high mountains but feeds up to 30m underwater in the ocean.

They are seriously unusual animals.

They are born only here in Kaikoura.

A week after their first flight as chicks, they fly off to western Australia for the winter.

They are stropy little things. They might take a bit of skin off with their sharp beaks if you are not wearing gloves, but I have lost lots of skin to them, the skin has healed and I'm still here.

I kind of like their attitude to life, a mix of exploratory, self-sufficient, cooperative and ready to defend if required,

Every one we keep alive helps to keep these amazing birds around.

Keep your eyes open, if you are out at night and it is damp, then over the nights of March you will probably see some (a dark smudge on a dark road), particularly if moonless and overcast.

[Ted Howard (Chair, Hutton's Shearwater Charitable Trust)]