

Safe havens for seabirds

Forest & Bird is joining an international project to plot and protect New Zealand's most important areas for birds. By **David Brooks**.



Forest & Bird has identified eight significant areas on New Zealand's coasts and in the vast seas that surround us in a project to protect our seabirds. The areas – called Important Bird Areas (IBAs) – are part of an international programme that highlights places for conservation.

Working as a partner of global conservation organisation BirdLife International, Forest & Bird has identified the IBAs in our exclusive economic zone (EEZ), which is the richest EEZ in the world for seabirds and the fourth largest anywhere.

More than a third of the world's 344 seabird species are found in these waters and 84 of them breed in New Zealand's EEZ. Half of these 84 species are threatened with extinction and, of the 30 endemic seabirds in New Zealand, 90 per cent are threatened.

Seabird scientist Susan Waugh has been leading work for Forest & Bird to identify the areas that are most important to our coastal birds, such as penguins, terns and shags, as well as the ocean-crossing species such as albatrosses, which spend most of their lives at sea.

Dr Waugh says the identification of the IBAs will help concentrate efforts by the Department of Conservation, marine users and all New Zealanders to protect some of our most vulnerable species. Around the world, IBAs have been a powerful tool for setting the conservation policies of governments, international organisations and local communities, even though they have no legal force and are not formally adopted by governments.

"They're a way of prioritising where conservation actions can be best targeted," Dr Waugh says. "They tend to be the top 10-30 per cent of bird habitats and they're designed to catch both big numbers of birds and threatened species."

Protecting these habitats also benefits the many other species that live within them. The marine IBAs can be used to define marine reserves or highlight areas where fishing

operators have to take measures to reduce the by-catch of seabirds.

IBAs are a well-established tool worldwide to identify places that are most important to the world's birdlife. Other countries have focussed on areas important to land birds, and are only now looking at marine IBAs. "We've started with an analysis of our seabird fauna because seabirds are such a huge group for us – there are tens of species of land birds in New Zealand, while there are hundreds of seabirds," Dr Waugh says.

The types of areas identified for marine IBAs worldwide are seaward extensions of breeding colonies, migration hotspots and important ocean areas for pelagic, or ocean-travelling, species.

Over the past 20 years, nearly 11,000 sites in some 200 countries and territories have been identified as terrestrial and marine IBAs, and the total is expected to eventually reach 20,000. IBAs are selected using standard, internationally recognised criteria, such as bird numbers, and the proportion of a species contained in a particular area. Taken together, the IBAs form a network considered the minimum needed to ensure the survival of these species across their ranges.

Identifying New Zealand's eight marine IBAs involved a huge amount of work, collating information on the birds that inhabit our shores and the EEZ extending 200 nautical miles (370 kilometres) from land – an area of more than four million square kilometres.

A total of 84 breeding sites were identified for IBAs. Satellite-tracking, sightings at sea and likely foraging sites around breeding colonies were used to identify coastal and offshore areas of New Zealand that would be included. They qualified if:

- A threatened species regularly uses them
- They have more than one per cent of the global population of a species
- More than 20,000 individuals are found there

The eight marine IBA areas identified were Northland-Hauraki, Kermadec, West Auckland coastal, Marlborough, Hawke's Bay, southern shelf, Chatham marine and Bounty-Antipodes plateau. Some sites qualified several times over for IBA status.

Despite more than a third of the world's seabirds frequenting the zone, data were available for only a small proportion to determine the initial set of marine IBAs. These areas are used by many of the 84 species of seabird that breed in New Zealand, and others, such as the wandering albatross, that visit during their non-breeding season.

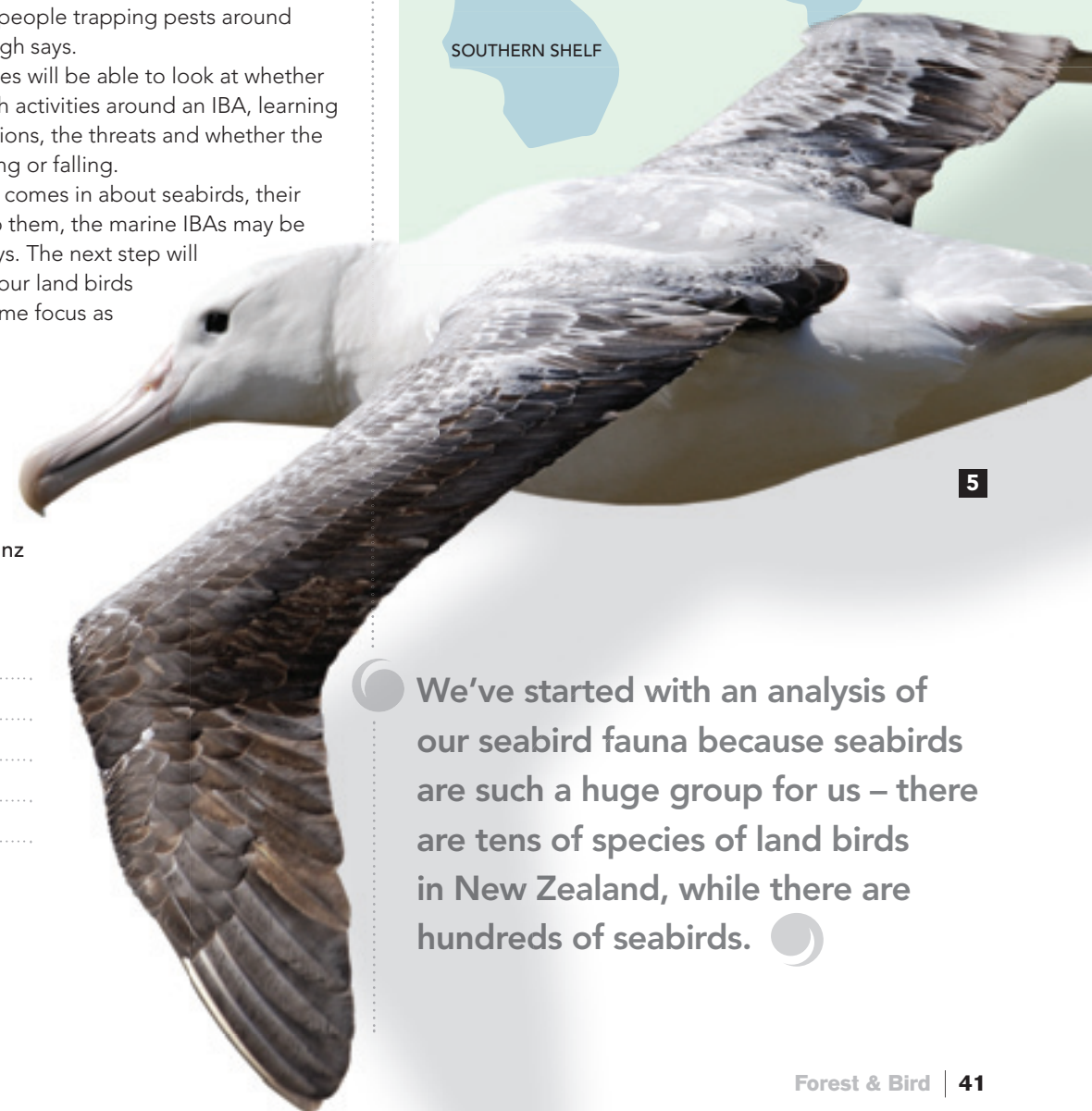
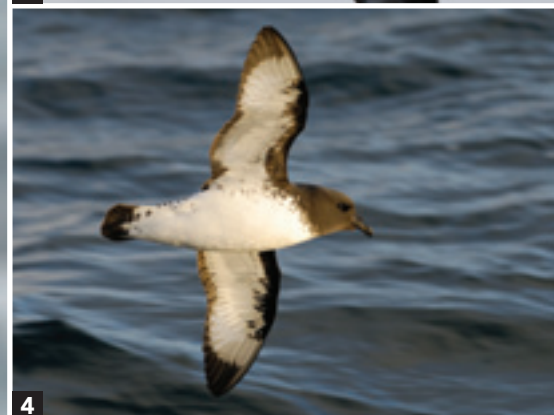
About a third of the world's species of penguins and shags breed in New Zealand, along with petrels and other seabirds.

Perhaps the most extraordinary of all are albatrosses. With a larger wingspan than any other bird, albatrosses spend at least 85 per cent of their lives at sea, returning to land only to breed. Of the 22 albatross species in the world, 12 nest in New Zealand and eight are endemic, ensuring New Zealand is known as the albatross capital of the world.

The IBAs will be a valuable way of helping government agencies, especially the Department of Conservation, to focus on priorities for protecting seabirds. Even more importantly, they can guide community involvement. "The communities are the key part because they are going to be the people on the ground, they are going to be the monitoring people, the people trapping pests around breeding sites," Dr Waugh says.

Forest & Bird branches will be able to look at whether they can organise branch activities around an IBA, learning about their bird populations, the threats and whether the bird populations are rising or falling.

As more information comes in about seabirds, their habits and the threats to them, the marine IBAs may be amended, Dr Waugh says. The next step will be researching IBAs for our land birds so they can enjoy the same focus as their marine cousins.



Watch for more details about New Zealand's marine IBAs on the Forest & Bird website: www.forestandbird.org.nz

F&B

- 1 Southern royal albatrosses
- 2 Auckland Island shag
- 3 Campbell albatross
- 4 Cape Petrel
- 5 Southern royal albatross

Photos: Craig McKenzie

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