

Black Shags

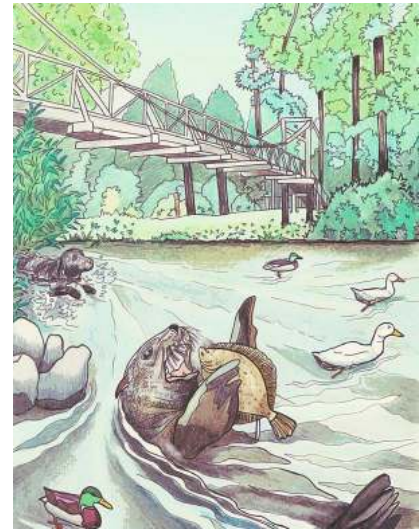
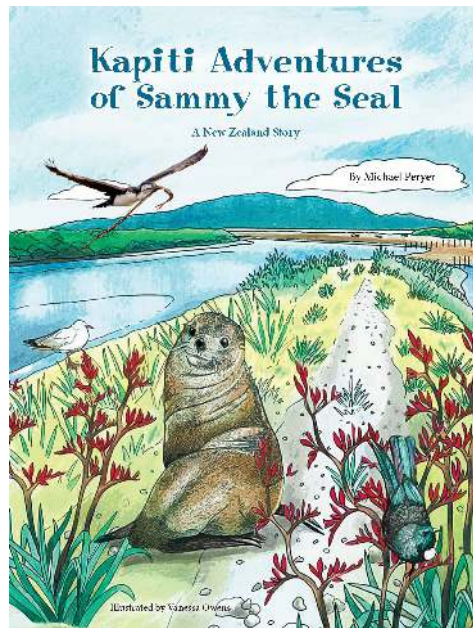


The large black shags have taken to fishing in the Waimanu lagoons these last few months. At times there will be up to five of these birds fishing together. This is something that has not happened regularly before, it must show that the fish-bypass is doing its job allowing fish from the river to be able to access the lagoons: before, they were not able to get into the lagoons as the weir didn't allow it to happen. The other day I saw the five large black shags fishing together and one of them, after catching what looked like a herring, threw it into the air and caught it again the other way up. It certainly looked as if it was killing it by biting it along its body. These birds swallow whole the fish they catch, they don't bite them before eating. The bird then discarded the dead fish, dived under the water and repeated the exercise. The end

result was many dead herrings strewn over the surface of the water. The only explanation I can think of was that this young bird was finding out how easy it was to capture these fish in the confines of the lagoon and was more or less playing. The outcome was a feast, as all the gulls on the estuary watch what the other birds are up to and arrived in numbers, to clean up the fish in quick time. It's not only the large black shags that have taken an interest in the lagoons. The little shags regularly uses it as their larder. Being a smaller and more delicate bird than the black shags, they prefer the fresh water and don't go out to sea very often. They also are more of a solitary bird and can be seen sitting in a tree on the side of the lagoon drying their wings or just resting. Then comes the little black shags. They have taken to fishing the lagoons in packs of around thirty birds, together. Again it appears that the fish by-pass is working as a few years ago this wasn't the case: its only in the last year or two that the shags have spent this much time in the lagoons. Funny enough although the pied shags are nesting in the trees overlooking the water, they don't appear to be spending that much time fishing the lagoons. Every now and then a pied will be seen cruising the lagoons, however, they would rather go out to sea for their food. They can be seen winging their way down the lagoons on their roadway in the sky to the beach then back again to their nests in the shag tree on the northern Waimanu lagoon.



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That night I hid under a large flax-bush and went to sleep. It was very scary as a little morepork woke me with its loud more-pork-ing. Then the possums in the trees were grunting and screeching, and came down to see who was hiding under the flax-bush. There were water-rats, stoats and hedgehogs scurrying by. At daybreak out came the rabbits to feed, and a large hare splashed across the river from one side to the other.

Illustrations by local arts trail artist Vanessa Owens