

# The AUSTRALASIAN gannet

One hour's drive northwest of Auckland lies the coastal area of Muriwai Regional Park, which is home to the most accessible gannet colony in New Zealand.

At the car park at Muriwai, signs direct visitors to a track that leads to the gannet colony. Visitors can follow a walking track through low coastal scrub before reaching an exposed viewing platform that overlooks a huge, flat rock, home to the main colony. Two offshore islands are homes to smaller colonies.

About 1200 pairs of gannets nest here from August to March each year, covering the rock with nests only centimetres apart. Gannets constantly take off into the wind, soaring over the water on the onshore updrafts, diving for fish and then returning to land on the apparently overcrowded rock. They weigh two and a half kilograms and have wingspans of two metres, so their precision landing in such a small space is amazing.

Their diving is spectacular. It starts about ten metres above the ocean surface. Then, like a dart, they hit the water at high speed to catch a fish. The fish is usually consumed before the gannet returns to the surface.

Each gannet pair lays only one egg and the parents take turns on the nest. The chicks hatch in the spring and within a week their bodies are covered with fluffy down. They soon begin to grow feathers and start exercising their wings.

At fifteen weeks the young gannets take their first flight, leaving the colony and heading off across the Tasman Sea to Australia, where they spend between two and six years. Those that survive the ordeal then return to the same colony, where they find a mate, nest and begin the process again. Having experienced life in Australia in their youth, they are apparently content to stay at home for the rest of their lives, as they never venture away from the colony again.



## Gannet details at a glance

- Overall length of a gannet is 90 cm, with a wingspan up to 2 m.
- During spring gannets lay a single egg, which takes about forty-four days to incubate.
- Gannet chicks stay with the colony until late summer.
- The young birds then migrate to their Australian destination, more than 2000 km away, returning to New Zealand after several years—but never returning to Australia.

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Sources: <http://members.virtualtourist.com/m/65e51/1cb9f7/>

<http://www.nzbirds.com/birding/murawai.html>