

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON SOUTH ISLAND PIED OYSTER-CATCHERS IN AUCKLAND.

By R. B. SIBSON.

Of the three New Zealand mainland forms of *Hamatopus*, perhaps the least problematical now since the publication of Dr Falla's paper (Rec. Cant. Mus. Vol. IV No. 5 pp. 259-266) is the inland-breeding riverbed oystercatcher of the South Island (*H. ostralegus finschi*). It is a bird of uniform coloration, and except for a very occasional freak, shows no noteworthy variation in the pied pattern of its plumage. It is slightly smaller and looks sprucer and less "humped up" than the variable oystercatchers of the North Island (*H. reischeki*) and its clear-cut pattern of black and white, with white inverted V running up the back, white rump, clean white underparts and conspicuous white wing-bar, is usually enough to separate it in the field from the most pied specimens of "reischeki." Another useful field character observable when the bird is standing, is the recess of white on the shoulder running up towards the base of the neck. In my experience *reischeki* seldom has this.

When nesting is over, the pied oystercatchers of the South Island move down to the coast, and although big flocks which may number thousands winter in certain southern localities, e.g., Waimakiriri estuary, many hundreds move northwards. For those that reach the province of Auckland the main wintering grounds are the extensive tidal flats of the harbours of Kaipara and Manukau, and of the Firth of Thames. Of Kaipara little is recorded. Major Buddle has noted about 200 in February and Mr P. Hanna knows them near Maungatoto as winter visitors in some scores. Some may travel still further north. I believe that five uniformly-marked pied oystercatchers that I saw in May, 1940, at the north end of the Ninety Mile Beach were *finschi*. They were with some *reischeki*, but looked smaller and tidier and tended to keep apart as a group.

Dr Falla has shown that *finschi* is an early breeder. It is not surprising, therefore, that some are already moving north in December, and arrive near Auckland about the time of the New Year. Some early records are:—

Firth of Thames, January 1, 1941: Nine. As none had been noted on four visits during the previous three months, there is little doubt that these were recent arrivals. January 2, 1942: Four. A single immature bird had been seen in October some miles from the normal haunt of *finschi* on this coast. Manukau, January 14, 1944: About sixty, many of which, to judge by their dusky bill-tips, were young birds of that season.

There is no doubt that many *finschi* only a few months old arrive in the north in January. On January 2, 1945, I had an excellent view of an adult and a youngster side by side at Kaiaua, Firth of Thames; and a few days later I took careful note of an obvious juvenal in Manukau. The legs of these young birds are pale greyish pink, and for an inch or so a duskiness covers the tip of the beak.

If adults are available for comparison, it is easily seen that the young birds are browner; and at a distance of about twenty yards the buffy tips on the scapulars and upper wing coverts are discernible.

By February flocks of *finschi* are becoming large, and most birds are settled in their winter quarters by the end of April. In both the Firth of Thames and the Manukau a peak has been noted in April, from which it may be assumed that some birds are still moving further north. (So far I have no records of flocks being seen in Whangarei Harbour). My biggest counts are:—F.o.T. c. 135 Ap. 4, 1942; Manukau c. 260, Ap. 16, 1944, c. 450, Ap. 2, 1945.

An interesting fact that has emerged from observations made in the last few years is that, like the Wrybills, flocks of *finschi* summer on these northern flats. It may safely be assumed that *finschi* does not breed till nearly two years old, and that these summering birds are juvenals which have not felt any strong impulse to return south and occupy nesting territory. In Kaipara Mr P. Hanna has seen flocks of about 50 birds as late as mid-September. In the Firth of Thames 24 were present on October 3, 1943; and seven on October 22, and again on November 5, 1944. In Manukau in 1942 the numbers actually increased during the spring months, viz., 25 on October 4, 26 on November 2, 36 on December 3 and 14. It may be that in these presumably juvenal birds the instinct to migrate at the end of winter is only weak and disappears after they have gone a short distance. This being so, juvenals that have wintered in Kaipara or further north may easily summer in Manukau or the Firth of Thames. Mr H. R. McKenzie now tells me that a single *finschi* spent the spring of 1944 on the Wairoa Estuary, Clevedon. A regular watch is kept on the estuary. It was first seen on October 29, and was still there on December 28.

There is little to say about the behaviour of *finschi* in the north. Day by day the flocks gather at the same shellbank roosts at high tide, and they may spend several hours on end resting on them. Food seems to be abundant and life can be leisurely. They associate amicably with Godwits; and quite often *finschi* individuals may be found in the large Godwit packs. It is noticeable, however, that both in Manukau and the Firth of Thames the localities where the flocks of *finschi* regularly occur are areas where there is a much thinner population of wintering Stilts. *Finschi* seem to prefer the firmer flats where sand, mud and shell are intermixed, whereas stilts are quite at home on soft flats of undiluted sticky mud. Food analyses of the stomach contents of the two species might be correlated with this tendency to occupy different types of feeding ground.

During their stay in the north they are generally sedate and reasonably approachable. Only twice have I noticed any spontaneous excitement. Once on January 14 trills were heard reminiscent of breeding; and again on April 6 for a short while, a few birds attempted something of the piping ceremony so often described by English writers, e.g., Huxley.

It is fitting to tell here the story of an albino which became a familiar figure to several observers in the Firth of Thames. It was

first seen by Mr H. R. McKenzie and myself on February 8, 1942, in a flock of *finschi*, and we had no doubt that it had recently arrived with them from the South Island. It was regularly seen throughout the winter, and when other *finschi* departed in early spring it remained behind and attached itself to a colony of stilts breeding on fresh water pools just behind the beach. While it was here I noted that it had a poor thin voice and, hard though it tried, it could not produce the ringing, piercing "tweep" of a full-blooded *finschi*. It was still present on January 2, 1943, but sometime after that it disappeared. It may have travelled farther north with other *finschi* that were passing through. However, on January 2, 1944, it was back again. We concluded it must be the same bird, for it behaved in the same way and haunted the same places. On May 21 it was obviously showing much more colour. We had always noted an underlying "gingerishness" on certain parts of its plumage, particularly on the upper back, and this was now darkening. On August 20, when last seen, it was a surprisingly different bird. From the head down to the lower chest it was a correct *finschi*. But though the fore edge of the wings was black, their near edge was white, as was also the tail. In flight it was a striking bird, all black in front, all white behind; except, of course, for beak and legs, of which the colour was now almost normal.

I have given these details because I know of no other instances when an albino has assumed almost normal plumage. When we last saw our bird it must have been at least nearly three years old; and if, as seems likely, it was a juvenal when it first reached the Firth of Thames, it seems that as it matured its proper pigments belatedly started to function.

The taxonomic status of *finschi* is still in doubt. As one who for many years was familiar with *Hæmatopus ostralegus* in Britain, perhaps I may state my reasons for believing that *finschi* must be considered a sub-species of *ostralegus*. In the field the two forms are very alike. Plumage differences are slight, perhaps the most obvious being that in winter British oystercatchers show a white patch on the throat. In voice and habits, too, here is general agreement. Both forms show a strong tendency to flock and migrate, but whereas some British oystercatchers nest inland, it appears that all *finschi* do so.

THE WHITE-FACED HERON.

By B. A. ELLIS.

The white-faced heron (*Notophox novae-hollandiae*) is not an uncommon bird in the lower Shag Valley. About the spring of 1941 a pair of herons was noticed in the vicinity, and they chose for their nesting site one of the many bluegums surrounding a homestead, and only a few hundred yards from a creek where food was obtained during nesting. Here they successfully reared a family of two, and so have