

New Zealand Bird Notes

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CONTENTS.

	Page
Winter Diving of Gannets, by W. J. Phillipps	33
Whimbrel in North Island, by E. G. Turbott, R. B. Sibson, R. H. D. Stidolph	34
Hudsonian Godwit in Auckland Province, by R. B. Sibson	35
Illustration: N.Z. Birds' Eggs	36
Wild Peafowl in Wanganui District, by C. A. Fleming	36
Classified Summarised Notes	37
Note: Distribution of Myna	55
Reviews	55

WINTER DIVING OF GANNETS.

By W. J. PHILLIPPS, Dominion Museum, Wellington.

In the N.Z. Journal of Science and Technology, vol. 7, p. 191, 1924, I supplied a small article on sardines or pilchards in Wellington Harbour. After recording the species as common at the wharves, I mentioned how on entering the harbour the pilchards (*Sardinops neopilchardus*) seemed to divide up into several shoals as could be determined by the movements of sea birds. Large numbers of gannets (*Morus serrator*) were to be seen diving with their accustomed rapidity and these together with several species of shags were for a few days at the end of July, 1924, very common in the harbour.

Again, in 1929, I had occasion to refer to this winter diving of the gannets to take pilchards (N.Z. Journ. Sci. and Tech., vol. 10, p. 343). In this article I mentioned the men stationed as gannet watchers on certain high points around Queen Charlotte Sound. From about 1860 until the early years of the present century, large numbers of pilchards were taken each winter from this Sound, the fish being locally known as Picton herring. The presence of shags was not a sure indication that pilchards were congregating; but gannets invariably collected and commenced diving when shoals became large. Gannets did not disturb the shoals to the same extent as did large fishes and porpoises. Pilchards were taken in the Sound by a net 14 fathoms deep and 96 fathoms long. These fish have a habit of lying packed in a silvery mass on the bottom and rising to the surface for food. The gannet watchers took up their stations in May and remained as required until August.

Since 1924 I have kept a general look-out for gannets arriving in Wellington Harbour, my observations being made from the Khandallah Hills. Odd birds may be seen diving in May and June; but generally most gannets arrive in July and August. Some years only one or two birds appear and never more than two can be seen at one time. The main diving ground seems to be about half a mile from the shore off the Kaiwarra-Ngahauranga section of the railway line. Water in this area is from 10 to 11 fathoms deep.

The last large flock of gannets noted in Wellington Harbour was in 1944, when numerous birds were diving far out in the harbour. This was in the latter winter months. Some of these birds must have been diving in very deep water—or perhaps the shoals were being kept at the surface by sharks and other predatory fish. More gannets dive early in the morning than later in the day. This diving habit seldom continues to any great extent for more than a few successive days and is quite erratic depending on the migrations of the shoals.

It is curious that the gannets do not seem to dive to take the estuary mullet, *Agonostomus forsteri* (called herring in the North Island). There are large shoals of these mullet constantly on the move close inshore in the relatively shallow water of the harbour. Shags select large specimens only. The pilchard is apparently a fish that is highly esteemed by more creatures than man. For many of the larger fishes, fishermen prefer to have it for bait, and the gannets add their preference.

WHIMBREL IN NORTH ISLAND.

(a) 14/9/42. A whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus variegatus*) was examined on the deck of an overseas vessel at Auckland. It had come aboard in the Tasman Sea south of Lord Howe Island. It fed readily on scraps of raw meat which were accepted immediately after capture. Exposed portions of the dorsal feathers were markedly frayed and of triangular outline as after migration. (E. G. Turbott.)

(b) A whimbrel has spent some months of the winter in Manukau Harbour. It was first seen on 16/6/46 among godwits, by P. C. Bull. On 28/7/46 P.C.B. and R.B.S. had excellent views of it at a distance of thirty yards in a pack of waders that included godwits, stilts and oyster-catchers. In flight it appeared as rather a darker bird than a godwit in winter plumage, and on the ground its dark spotted chest helped to distinguish it from the godwits. The decurved beak was not always easily discernible, but was particularly well seen once, when as the birds stood on a small rock, its head was silhouetted against smooth water. On 4/8/46 it was again well seen by N. M. Gleeson and R.B.S. It was resting and preening itself on a shell-bank among stilts, and attention was drawn to it at once by its dark chest. For comparison, a party of pale-chested godwits was standing a few yards distant. As the tide dropped, the whimbrel, in company with other waders, moved down to the mud to feed. Eventually it flew off alone, and gave its distinctive call three times, a rippling trill but not at full strength. Like most of the godwits that pass the winter in New Zealand, the bird was almost certainly immature. This seems to be the first time that a whimbrel has been recorded as wintering in New Zealand. It was well seen with a telescope again on 21/8/46 by D. A. Urquhart and the writer. It was noted that the legs were a pale bluish grey. (R. B. Sibson.)