

UNUSUAL NEST-SITE OF A RED-BILLED GULL COLONY.

By W. J. Phillipps and C. J. Lindsay.

In 1944, during a visit to Rotorua, it was reported to one of us (W.J.P.) that in the spring of 1943, terns were laying their eggs on two small islands in a warm thermal pool behind the bathhouse at Whaka-



warewa. This report was supplied by Mr. D. T. Alexander, headmaster of the Whakarewarewa School, whose attention had been drawn to this occurrence by the fact that a schoolboy had shown him several of the eggs which he had secured by swimming to the islands. These eggs had been lost. It seems that many people knew of the eggs, the general belief being that the birds left them there to be hatched by the

thermal heat in the ground. However, in 1944, certain subterranean changes took place, the result being that the pool in question more or less dried up; and Mr. Alexander received a report that the birds had transferred their breeding-place to Waiotapu.

In September of 1946 we were able to visit the district and found time to inquire further into the remarkable story concerning the habits of these birds. We visited Waiotapu, where we were met by Mr. W. H. Walker, who has charge of the thermal area open to visitors in that locality. Mr. Walker produced a photograph of the birds nesting in 1944 in the immediate vicinity of the hot-water pools. From this photograph and his description, it was possible to identify the species as the red-billed gull (*Larus novaehollandiae*). Mr. Walker informed us that he had done everything in his power to prevent visitors from disturbing the nesting birds, and had fed both adults and young in the hope that they would return the following year; but the birds had not appeared since the above-mentioned date.

At Waiotapu we were conducted by Mr. Walker past various types of thermal activity to a slight ridge bordering the lower end of a hot-water pool some acres in extent. This was the breeding-ridge of the red-billed gulls, actually a small area about thirty feet by twelve feet. The ground was slightly warm to the touch; and this must have been of material assistance in the incubation of the eggs. Evidence of thirty-two nests was plainly visible. Doubtless many others had been destroyed in the passage of time. One nest was only three feet away from a steaming sulphur-encrusted fumarole; others were at varying distances from a few feet upwards from similar fumaroles. Mr. Walker estimated that 150 birds were breeding here in 1944; and he watched the parent birds leading their chicks around the edge of the large hot-water pool to a cold-water pool several hundreds yards distant. Here, by pecking and poking, the adults taught their young to enter the water and swim.

We were fortunate in being able to secure a series of photographs of the nesting ridge, and we are indebted to Miss S. S. Baker for the accompanying line drawing. As these birds are said to occupy nesting-sites on alternate years, it is possible that they will return to Waiotapu at a later date. No birds have arrived to breed on this site in the 1945-46 season. Further investigations of more remote thermal areas also are desirable. Normally, the red-billed gull nests on an unfrequented rocky coast or on islands offshore, not infrequently in large numbers. What caused a small colony to take up a nesting-site miles inland, especially in a thermal area, is difficult to explain.

BLACK SHAG WITH EEL.—On 6/11/46 when driving over a bridge crossing a large drain on the Okuku Road, north-west from Shannon, I noticed a wild splashing in the water. I found that a black shag (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) had captured a large eel. The shag had the eel gripped below the head and the eel had coiled itself round the bird's neck. Unfortunately my arrival startled the bird which opened its beak and the eel promptly slid into the water. The shag, which had been beating the water with its wings (possibly trying to lift its heavy capture) flew up and made off.—A. A. Savill, Levin.