

BIRDS OF PARENGARENGA HARBOUR AND FARTHEST NORTH.

By A. H. Watt, Paua.

The accompanying notes have been compiled from observations made during the past 32 years. The locality comprises the peninsula forming the extreme northern tip of the North Island and the isthmus as far south as Te Kao, a Maori village at the southern end of Parengarenga Harbour. It contains about 250 square miles and is sparsely populated.

The isthmus is low-lying with sand dunes on both coasts, those on the east being composed of almost pure white silica sand. North of the harbour the land broadens out and is considerably higher, rising to a little over 1000 feet in the peaks of Kohuronaki and Unuwahao.

Except at Te Kao, where dairy farming is carried on in a small way, the land is uncultivated and unfenced, and provides rough grazing ground for some few thousands of sheep, cattle and horses, which wander unrestricted. The local Maori name Koraha (wilderness) aptly describes it. The predominant vegetation is stunted manuka, wiwi and fern. On the high land near the north coast are patches of bush.

Each year sees the bush decrease in area, for all through the summer, and indeed at any time when conditions are dry enough, burning of the vegetation goes on without let or hindrance. The gumdigger does it to clear ground for his operations, the stockowner to provide "feed" for his animals, and others for the pure joy of seeing a good blaze. The land, most of it rather poor, is rapidly becoming more impoverished. Large areas have, within the memory of the writer, become almost completely sterile and incapable of providing even what is regarded as "feed" in these parts.

Parengarenga Harbour, like a giant octopus, lies sprawled across the peninsula, its long arms twisting and turning in all directions, some of them reaching to within five miles of the west coast. At low tide it consists of countless channels separated by banks of sandy mud, mostly covered with eel-grass (*Zostera*) on which the waders find food. The long spit, with its range of white dunes, that runs south from the harbour entrance is a conspicuous feature of the district and could easily be mistaken for snow-clad hills.

Paua, sometimes wrongly called Parenga, is situated near the centre of the harbour on a tongue of land separating the western and southern reaches.

Kiwi (*Apteryx australis*).—Has not been recorded from the district.

Little blue penguin (*Eudyptula minor*).—Nests on rocky parts of the northern and eastern coastline, and inside the harbour opposite the entrance, at Te Pua Point.

Dabchick (*Poliiocephalus rufopectus*).—Occurs sparingly on a number of small lakes as far north as Te Paki.

Order procellariiformes. The fluttering shearwater (*Puffinus gavia*), and probably other shearwaters and petrels, are sometimes seen in flocks just inside the bar; but no birds of this order have been observed within the harbour. On several occasions, always in March, a young wandering albatross (*Diomedea exulans*) in brown plumage has been seen sitting on the sand on the eastern ocean beaches.

Black, pied and white-throated shags (*Phalacrocorax carbo*, *P. varius* and *P. melanoleucos*).—All occur in considerable numbers in the harbour.

Daily trips to the west coast have been observed at certain seasons, probably during periods of abundance of small fish. At a nesting colony of black shags on the lake at Te Paki breeding has been recorded as early as July; another colony has been abandoned on a small lake further south, the nests, which are in tall manuka, having been almost enveloped by drifting sand. There is a nesting colony of pied shags in a pohutukawa near the mouth of the Whareana Creek, a few miles south of North Cape.

Gannet (*Morus serrator*).—Regular visitors to the harbour in spring and summer, but never more than six at a time.

White heron (*Casmerodius albus*).—One seen on several occasions, once roosting for some months regularly in pohutukawas on a tidal creek near Te Kao.

Reef heron (*Demigretta sacra*).—Plentiful. A flock of 30 were observed during the winter of 1946. On 8th February, 1947, there were 11 in the neighbourhood of Paua. Occurs in small numbers all through the year.

Bittern (*Botaurus poiciloptilus*).—Frequently observed in swampy areas.

Grey duck (*Anas poicilorhyncha*).—Common both in the harbour and on the many small lakes and lagoons in the area.

Scaup (*Aythya novaeseelandiae*).—Not common.

Black swan (*Cygnus atratus*).—In the harbour in flocks of up to 300 in autumn and winter; breeds singly and in small groups on lakes throughout the northern peninsula.

Falcon (*Falco novaeseelandiae*).—Once observed at Te Kao, c. 1928.

Harrier (*Circus approximans*).—Common throughout.

Brown quail (*Syncoicus ypsilophorus*).—Common.

Californian quail (*Lophortyx californicus*).—Only as far north as Te Kao, where a solitary cock bird was seen on one occasion. Between Te Kao and Awanui it occurs only in small flocks.

Pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*).—Common.

Weka (*Gallirallus greyi*).—Not in the district. The name weka is used locally for the banded rail.

Banded rail (*Hypotaenidia philippenses*).—Common, nesting in rushes round the harbour edge.

Spotless crane (*Porzana tabuensis*).—Observed once, inland south of Te Kao.

Pukeko (*Porphyrio porphyrio*).—In restricted numbers, but well established, occurring as far north as Spirits Bay.

Oyster catchers (*Haematopus* spp.).—Both pied and black individuals. Nesting on ocean beaches; and in flocks of up to 40, both pied and black, in the harbour.

Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*).—In small flocks of up to 24, arriving and departing at same time as godwits.

Lesser golden plover (*Pluvialis dominica*).—Never seen on the harbour, but seen on paddocks in the Te Kao Valley. An informant reports flocks of 50 this year (1946-47 summer).

Banded dotterel (*Charadrius bicinctus*).—Does not nest about the harbour, and not plentiful even in non-breeding plumage on mudflats. In last week of February, 1947, however, observed fairly frequently feeding

high on mudflats, in post-breeding and juvenile plumage. Large wintering flocks have been observed in the Te Kao Valley by the end of March.

New Zealand dotterel (*Pluviorhynchus obscurus*).—Nests on shell banks in the harbour in many places, and remains in the harbour throughout the winter. Nests found on hillside of open scrub in Te Kao Valley.

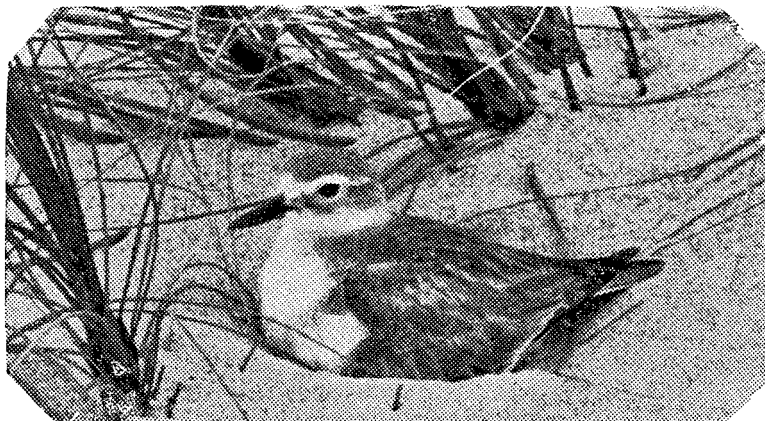


Photo: G. A. Buddle.

(By courtesy "Weekly News.")

N.Z. DOTTEREL ON NEST.

Wrybill (*Anarhynchus frontalis*).—A flock of 13 first observed on 26/1/47, feeding on marine worms.

Bar-tailed godwit (*Limosa lapponica*).—Accounts of massed departure from Spirits Bay do not correspond with my observations for the last 32 years. Godwit flocks arrive at Parengarenga Harbour in September, generally after the second week, and remain in approximately the same numbers throughout the summer. No increase has been noted before departure, which generally takes place during the last week in February and first week in March. At this time, however, there is much activity in the flocks, large bodies of the birds circling together and performing side-slipping flights, as if there had been an increase in coherence within the flock. The flocks finally disappear, but without assembling at any particular place.

During the summer there is a constant routine with the tides. As the tide rises within the harbour, flocks, generally of some considerable size, pass swiftly towards the east, where the birds congregate on the ocean beaches to north and south of the Heads. One flock observed here at high tide numbered at least 10,000; knots and other smaller waders were probably included in considerable numbers. As soon as the tide begins to fall the birds return to the harbour in smaller flocks of c. 30. Their piping call is frequently heard during both inward and outward flights. Regular flights to the west coast have also been observed from Te Kao. Towards the time of departure, many red-breasted birds are observed (Maori, kura), but grey-breasted birds are still present in considerable numbers (Maori, karoro). Flocks of up to 60 have remained throughout the winter (birds remaining are known to the Maoris as kakao). The general term for the godwit, as elsewhere, is kuaka.

Knot (*Calidris canutus*). Maori, *parerarera*.—Numbers fewer than godwits, but feed in close association; and remarks concerning habits of godwits apply in general to knots. They arrive and leave at the same time; but have not been observed in winter.

Curlew (*Numenius madagascariensis*).—One seen about the harbour throughout the year for the last two years; not in association with godwits, but often close to a flock of oystercatchers. The curlew was well known to the old Maori, to whom it was known as *tutei* (sentry). Maori informants refer to it as associating closely with flocks of godwits. Netting of godwits was carried out at the peak of high water, when the flocks seemed to settle down for a short period. The *tutei*, which up to this time had kept up its characteristic call, then suddenly became silent: at this moment the net was drawn.

White-headed stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*).—Does not nest within the harbour, where it is present only in small flocks except in the breeding season. Flocks of up to 250 have been seen on grassland at Houhora, and smaller flocks in the Te Kao Valley, in winter. Nests in creek beds on northern coast. Two totally black stilts have been observed, and one black except for white belly.

Caspian tern (*Hydroprogne caspia*).—A small colony on the white sand of the ocean beach one mile south of Parengarenga Heads; on 12/11/1941 the colony contained 24 nests, 10 with two eggs, the remainder with one egg; the ground colour of the eggs in this colony varies from café-au-lait to blue-white; in 1940 there were 30 nests in the colony. Observed regularly fishing in the harbour.

White-fronted tern (*Sterna striata*).—Never visits the harbour. No nesting ground in the neighbourhood, but observed on the west coast.

Black-backed gull (*Larus dominicanus*).—Scattered nests on north and east coasts; small colonies on west coast. Nests on east coast are on bare sand near the colony of Caspian terns, and are of remarkable structure, being built up to a height of 18 inches, out of sand and leaves of pingao. On the west coast, two miles south of the Bluff, a colony occupies the broken stumps of an ancient forest in the sandhills.

Red-billed gull (*Larus novaehollandiae*).—Occurs in greater numbers than the previous species, with minimum numbers in the breeding season. Large wintering flocks roost in the harbour. Huge flocks observed feeding off Waikuku Beach, south of North Cape, have come in to rest in thousands on the sand, going out again later to feed; on such occasions the smell on the beach is very noticeable. A few scattered pairs nest on the rocky north coast; large colonies on the Three Kings.

Pigeon (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*).—Still present in some numbers in remaining forest of the northern block.

Kaka (*Nestor meridionalis*).—Absent.

Parrakeets (*Cyanoramphus* spp.).—One report of a parrakeet having been seen on the forested slopes of Unuwhao over 20 years ago.

Shining cuckoo (*Chalcites lucidus*).—Appears regularly.

Long-tailed cuckoo (*Eudynamis taitensis*).—Reported from the district; once 12 together, reported during rough weather.

Morepork (*Ninox novaeseelandiae*).—Generally distributed, even in open country amongst low scrub, where it was seen about the road at night.

Dollar bird (*Eurystomus orientalis*).—One at Te Kao, 1923.



Photo: G. A. Buddle.

FERN-BIRD FEEDING YOUNG.

(By courtesy "Weekly News.")

Kingfisher (*Halcyon sanctus*).—Common, nesting in low clay banks round the harbour; once boring in dead willow at Paua.

Pipit (*Anthus novaeseelandiae*).—Nesting in considerable numbers; present in all open country.

Fern-bird (*Bowdleria punctata*).—Still common in spite of frequent scrub fires. Careful observation has convinced me that the double call is always made by two birds.

Grey warbler (*Pseudogerygone igata*) and fantail (*Rhipidura fuliginosa*).—Both plentiful.

Silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis*).—Plentiful, large flocks observed in winter.

Tui (*Prothemadera novaeseelandiae*).—Absent from the district.

Greenfinch (*Chloris chloris*).—In small numbers, never observed in flocks, one seen at North Cape.

Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*).—Common.

Redpoll (*Carduelis cabaret*).—Two observed near Te Kao, 1941.

Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*).—Plentiful, in considerable flocks.

House sparrow (*Passer domesticus*).—Everywhere common about settlements.

Yellowhammer (*Emberiza citrinella*).—Common.

Song thrush (*Turdus ericetorum*) and blackbird (*T. merula*).—Both very common.

Hedge sparrow (*Prunella modularis*).—Now well represented; observed within the last ten years.

Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*).—Common.

Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*).—Common, although scarcity of nesting places may restrict numbers; kingfisher which bored in dead willow was evicted. Feeds frequently on mudflats.

White-backed magpie (*Gymnorhina hypoleuca*).—Furthest north of which I have heard record is Herekino Gorge, 10 miles south of Kaitaia.

BIRD NOTES COLLECTED IN NORTH CANTERBURY, October, 1934.—Among a series of notes collected at West Oxford, Canterbury, in 1934, are some bird notes which may prove of interest. My informant was the late Mr. A. Burrows, who arrived in Canterbury in the year 1874 in the ship Waitari. Sky-larks and hares were brought out on this ship and introduced into Canterbury. (Previous introductions had already been made.) Mr. Burrows tells of the abundance of the weka when he arrived in West Oxford. He was very interested to watch Maoris catching them by the well-known means of using a weka wing attached to a stick about 6 feet long and a noose attached to a longer stick. The cry of the weka was made by the fowler using a whistle of flax called a whakapi made from the youngest and finest blades of the flax plant. To take the stiffness out of them the blades were previously heated in a fire. The bird came to investigate and was caught in the noose. This account is of interest as it is the first time the name whakapi has been recorded. Literally, whaka is the causative prefix, and pi is the young of land birds. Following the Maori custom, the first settlers used the kea for food. In the winter it came down from Mt. Oxford to West Oxford in twos and threes. The flesh was considered very palatable.—W. J. Phillipps, Dominion Museum, Wellington.