

BREEDING HABITS OF RED-BILLED GULL.

By R. H. D. STIDOLPH, Masterton.

On Kapiti Island, in the first half of November, 1941, a considerable colony of red-billed gulls (*Larus novaehollandiae*) located on a rock not many chains from the caretaker's house provided an admirable opportunity of observing the breeding habits of this bird.

The female is fed by the male, after supplication on the part of the female, on the nesting rock. The female lowers her head, and turns her bill upwards, upon which the male regurgitated food, the female sometimes taking it direct from the male's bill, though at other times from the ground. On most occasions coition follows immediately after feeding. The male invariably flaps his wings, opens his bill and utters incessantly and quickly, "kar, kar, kar" during the act, which lasts two or three minutes. The males stands fairly erect with the wings upright over the back and when coition is taking place oscillates his tail sideways as it is brought down under the female's tail. The male stamps his feet alternately, as if to maintain balance. Females agreeable to the act offer no objections but stand still and erect, sometimes bending the head backwards or turning it sideways, as if to make half-hearted pecks at the male's feet. The presumed female which objects to coition raises her wings, pecks vigorously at the male, refuses to stand and screeches vociferously.

The presumed female appears to gather the nest material, some of which is picked up right alongside the nest site, though other material is gathered from much further afield. When the material, often pieces of seaweed, is placed in the nest site, the female squats in the cup, with the breast pressed down and works her feet backwards to shape the cup. The male stands by and watches, though when the female is absent he may sometimes mould the nest in the manner described.

Some birds at this colony carried large pieces of seaweed; one was seen with a tiny piece of dry grass stem which it dropped into the nest! One bird which was seen to carry several pieces of material from the beach to its nest, then flew from the nest, dipped its bill in the sea water during flight, returned to the nest, and "watered" it—water was seen to drip from the bill on the bird's return and the whole act had a deliberate air about it.

The general atmosphere was one of constant screams and harsh gratings, with the "kar, kar" of mating birds almost constantly heard, interspersed with occasional squabbles when a bird objected to the too near approach of another bird to its nesting site. Other birds, perhaps unmated, stood on the fringe of the colony, either drying or preening their feathers.

Much thieving goes on in the colony, as the birds appropriate nest material if this is possible. For instance, a nest seen on November 1 had disappeared on November 4 together with the two eggs it contained. Six nests which earlier had an egg each, on November 4 had lost their eggs.

On November 1 it was estimated that there were 100 birds on or near the nesting site and another 100 were feeding about half a mile away. Many nests were under construction; there was only one egg. A white-fronted tern (*Sterna striata*) had a "nest" on top of the rock and returned very promptly to its single egg. On November 2, the gull nest

which had one egg the previous day, had two, while a second gull's nest had one egg. Another white-fronted tern's nest was found on the side of the rock with one egg. The following day two more gulls' nests had an egg each. On November 5, ten nests had an egg each, and on November 7, eleven had one egg and four had two. On this day three eggs were picked up in the colony, sucked of their contents. On November 10, 21 nests had one egg and eight two eggs. A count showed that there were 203 birds in the colony. The next day, the position was: One egg, 20 nests; two eggs, 12 nests. At this point my own observations ended.

On November 17, my wife, who remained on the island, states that there were 39 nests with an egg each and 39 with two eggs each, while two nests had three eggs each. One of the tern's eggs was found on the beach with a fully-formed chick inside. On November 18 a harrier (*Circus approximans*) was worrying the colony and many eggs were found to be broken. The gulls left the colony in a crowd when the harrier flew over, and appeared to make no attempt to drive it away. Later, according to Mr. A. S. Wilkinson, custodian of the island, heavy seas washed away the nests on the lower portion of the rock and only one nest, which was built higher up the hillside near the rock and under vegetation, produced fully-grown chicks.

AUSTRALIAN RAVEN AS A STRAGGLER.

By K. A. Hindwood, Sydney, N.S.W.

The occurrence of what seems to have been either a crow (*Corvus cecillae*) or a raven (*C. coronoides*) from Australia, in the Mokohinau Group, New Zealand ("New Zealand Bird Notes," April, 1947, p. 70)* is of considerable interest as it indicates how far land birds may sometimes stray from their normal range. Some years ago a so-called "crow" made its appearance on Lord Howe Island. It was first observed on September 18, 1941, and remained on the Island for some two years, living largely on the eggs of sea-birds. On October 3, 1943, it was captured in a rabbit trap. The head of the bird was sent to me and was later examined by Norman Favaloro, R.A.O.U., who has a wide knowledge of the differences between the crow and the raven. In his opinion the head was that of the Australian raven, probably a female. Lord Howe Island lies some 300 miles east of Port Macquarie on the New South Wales coast.

The following extract from a letter written by Max Nicholls to Captain J. D. McComish gives details of the capture of the raven:—"I found a wild duck's nest in the swamp at Mosely Park. It had eleven eggs in it, but Mr. Crow came along and sucked the lot. I declared war and made a dummy nest with fowl feathers, put four eggs in it, and set a rabbit trap alongside. For a few days the bird only looked at the nest: at last he came to the eggs and trod on the trap to which a line six feet long was attached, so Mr. Crow got into the water and was drowned. He had white rings (irides) around the eyes. I chopped his head off and preserved it. I counted forty-seven "wide awake" (sooty tern) eggs under one tree that he used to frequent."—October 12, 1943.

* See page 106 of this issue.