

BIRD LIFE AT "SUNDRUM," SOUTH CANTERBURY.

By David H. Graham, Lower Hutt.

From May 24 to June 19, 1947, Miss Jessie Jackson and I spent a working holiday at the guest house of Mr. and Mrs. W. Cole, of "Sundrum." It was not our intention to study bird life, but to our surprise and pleasure on each occasion we had time off for a walk, more and more native birds were mentally recorded so that with the usual flair of naturalists we began to keep copious notes of both native and introduced birds.

"Sundrum" is a guest house about two miles from Woodbury and seven from Geraldine, with the Waihi River running through the farm, which is of about 80 acres in extent. Throughout this farm are clumps of native trees growing in their natural state, with many exotic trees about the place. Throughout the farm there are thousands of native trees, plants, shrubs and creepers, from seedlings to trees 30 or 40 feet in height, making an ideal sanctuary for our native birds as well as the introduced ones. The majority of native trees comprised totara, ribbon-wood, broadleaf, rimu, white pine, miro, matai, kowhai, mahoe, makomako, whitey-wood, matipo, bush lawyer (two species), lancewood, kaikomako, and many others. The place was once heavy, virgin bush and after being milled the young trees and plants were left to grow. The farm is grassed and fortunately for the native trees, only a few house cows are kept and the farm is lightly stocked with sheep, so that there is no destruction of growth and the plant vegetation has every chance to seed and increase. In Mr. and Mrs. Cole, we have a couple who are using every endeavour to assist in the increase of native birds, and no shooting is allowed. Further, Mr. Cole has a number of honey-pots for bellbirds and white-eyes and these are kept well filled during the non-flowering season. On the property is a weeping totara and a small one which has been grown from a cutting. These form an interesting addition to the beauties of the area.

Following is a list of species:—

Black shag (*Phalacrocorax carbo*).—These could be seen almost every day flying overhead; as many as seven at one time were noted flying eastward towards the sea.

Bittern (*Botaurus poiciloptilus*).—Not seen by me, but Miss Jackson saw one on a previous visit to "Sundrum."

Grey duck (*Anas poicilorhyncha*).—Were not seen, but often heard at night; said to be common at times.

Bush hawk (*Falco novaeseelandiae*).—One to three were seen every day flying over.

Harrier (*Circus approximans*).—One or two were seen on several occasions. A dead one was found below a power line.

Marsh Crake (*Porzana pusilla*).—This shy bird was seen on several occasions; never more than two at one time and always on a strip of grassland adjacent to dense clumps of bush near a damp, overgrown riverbed. Their unusual notes, a ticking or chattering sound, were heard at night; the birds were calling to each other across the drive. Identi-

fication was confirmed by reference to a specimen in the Canterbury Museum.

Black-backed gull (*Larus dominicanus*).—Numerous and often seen flying over; once saw 23 standing on grass land. Abundant during stormy weather; flying to the coast as the weather improved.

Pigeon (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*).—Often seen in twos and threes and on one occasion six were seen flying and two were sitting in a tree. Very tame, inhabiting trees near the homestead. According to Miss Jackson and Mr. Cole they are increasing. Saw a pair feeding on kowhai leaves. This bush, with berry-bearing trees, should give ample food.

Shining cuckoo (*Chalcites lucidus*).—Not seen by us. Mr. Cole states they are regular visitors to "Sundrum."

Little owl (*Athene noctua*).—Not seen by us but Mr. Maud saw a number of bell-birds giving one a thrashing. It was not seen again.

Kingfisher (*Halcyon sanctus*).—Only one specimen seen on riverbed. Said to be common during the summer months.

Rifleman (*Acanthisitta chloris*).—From two to four were seen on one day; very tame. Quite common during the nesting season. It builds in stacks of firewood and in farm sheds, according to the owner of "Sundrum." All regular visitors say they are increasing.

Bush wren (*Xenicus longipes*).—At least a dozen of these birds were seen by us one day feeding along the branches of withy willows growing on a groyne. Mr. Cole states they are common during the summer months. The birds worked their way along the branches but spent equally as much time searching among fallen leaves and debris on the ground. They were active and elusive and when approached nearer, would utter a note like "seep, seep" before moving away. Not in any instance did they stray far from cover and moved or ran along the branches as much as possible under cover of twigs and leaves, or, when going to another branch, would move in short flights. They always carried themselves parallel with the branch, or, if they alighted on the ground or another branch, would stand erect and then lower themselves and begin to feed. They were most active in their movements, and with their short truncated tail and straight bill, made me certain they were wrens when I first saw them. A subsequent visit to the Canterbury Museum and a discussion with Dr. R. A. Falla and with Mr. L. McCaskill proved the birds to be this species.

Pipit (*Anthus novaeseelandiae*).—Only two specimens seen.

Grey warbler (*Pseudogerygone igata*).—Often seen feeding; on one day saw six.

Yellow-breasted tit (*Petroica macrocephala macrocephala*). — Two seen, 25/5/47, at "Sundrum"; two about two miles up Waihi Gorge on 26/5/47; and a pair in Turton's Bush, 19/6/47. As many as nine seen in one day. Very tame.

Fantail (*Rhipidura fuliginosa*).—Pied fantails were very common, more especially about the riverbed and it was not uncommon to count 20 flying between patches of bush or across a narrow strip of water catching insects. Counted 45 on one walk through this property. Two pairs of black fantails seen; did not mix with the pied fantails while we were there.

Brown creeper (*Finschia novaeseelandiae*).—From two to four seen at one time and eight in one day's walk about the farm. Two seen in Turton's Bush about a mile away.

White-eye (*Zosterops lateralis*).—As many as six were seen in one day; said to be very common during the summer months. Not once did I see one making use of honey pots or pieces of fat tied to trees near the house.

Tui (*Prothemadera novaeseelandiae*).—Only one seen, at the top of a matai.

Bell-bird (*Anthornis melanura*).—The most abundant native bird at "Sundrum" and exceedingly tame, coming each morning to sit on the wistaria which covers the sides of the house, and often sitting not three feet distant while I shaved. From the first thing in the morning till nightfall they were heard singing. There must be hundreds of these songsters within a radius of a mile from the house. In almost every clump of bush could be seen and heard one or two of these birds. Mr. Cole has a number of honey pots on a porch in front of the house and in a fruit tree at the back door. He keeps these filled during the winter and first one and then another bird would come for nectar almost all day. Birds often came to the porch while guests were having morning or afternoon tea and supped nectar only a few feet away. All the regular guests affirm that they are increasing.

INTRODUCED BIRDS.

Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*).—Numerous about the farm and adjacent grass lands, especially in those parts where thistles were growing. As many as forty were counted in one flock.

Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*).—Abundant; very tame and always round the sun porches ready to be fed with crumbs by guests. Often came into bedrooms seeking food from breakfast trays.

Thrush (*Turdus ericetorum*).—Common throughout the farm, especially about the homestead and though they came to watch the sparrows eating crumbs, not once did I see a thrush attempt to pick up a crumb.

Blackbird (*Turdus merula*).—Common, about equal in abundance with the thrush. Everywhere about the farm and eating crumbs with sparrows at afternoon tea.

Hedge sparrow (*Prunella modularis*).—Seldom seen near the house, but seen in twos and threes further afield, especially in hedges and thickets of exotic trees. Seemed very shy. About eight would be the limit to be seen in a walk of a mile about the farm.

Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*).—Seen in twos and threes; never more than six in a mile walk, always in open pasture.

Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*).—Murmurations of starlings often seen away from homestead, though single ones came to feed round garbage pails at the back door. Up to 80 seen at dusk flying in circles before taking off to roosting place.

White-backed magpie (*Gymnorhina hypoleuca*).—Up to six seen at one time. More tame and confiding when in a party of six than when singly or in pairs. Heard producing bubbling-like note when perching in trees at night time.