

BLACK-FRONTED TERN IN THE NORTH.

By R. B. Sibson, Auckland.

To the southern coast of the North Island the black-fronted tern (*Chlidonias albigularis*) is known as a not uncommon winter visitor (cf. Wodzicki, Birds of the Waikanae Estuary). During recent years it has also been found several times in the province of Auckland; and this has prompted me to collect such information as I can find about the presence of this bird in the north.

In his first edition (1872) of "A History of the Birds of New Zealand," Buller says that he does not remember having ever met with black-fronted terns further north than Wanganui Heads. But the second edition (1888) contains much more information. Once in the spring—the time of year is interesting—at the confluence of the Karapiro and the Waikato, Buller watched "a pair of these birds disporting in the air," and, although elsewhere in his description he says the bill of the black-fronted tern is "bright yellow," he remarks here on "their lovely coral bills." The use of the adjective "coral" prompts the query whether the bills really were "coral" and if so, whether they really were black-fronted terns which he saw. May they not have been perhaps white-winged black terns (*C. leucopterus*) which do have red bills? Stead, much more accurately, in my opinion, gives the colour of the bill of the adult as "rich orange."

On a subsequent occasion Buller watched two of these terns from Hamilton Bridge; and again when travelling in the Lower Waikato he observed a "very considerable flock in a meadow quite close to the railway-line, where several ploughs were at work." Then he adds that he had also met with smaller flocks at Onehunga and Maketu.

In the Supplement (1905) there is a passage under the heading of white-fronted tern (*Sterna striata*) which shows that Buller's identification of terns is not to be accepted without question. Here it is: "On the Taupo Plains, where there are thousands of sterile acres covered with manuka scrub, about five or six miles inland of the lake, I observed two terns, apparently of this species (white-fronted), hovering over the ground, although I find it difficult to imagine what they could find to attract them in such a barren locality. Probably they were in quest of lizards. This species frequents the Taupo Lake, and so does *Sterna albigularis*." Both the surroundings and the behaviour here described strongly suggest *albigularis*, and it is worth noting that Buller adds as an afterthought that this species frequents Lake Taupo. It must surely be an exaggeration to say that white-fronted terns, an almost entirely marine species of which there are few, if any, proved inland records, "frequent" the lake.

Although not strictly relevant to the present discussion, perhaps Buller's concluding remarks from the passage on the white-fronted tern in the Supplement may be quoted here with one comment: "I found this tern abundant at Tonga. I saw no *Sterna caspia* there, but they are plentiful at Wakaya, in the Fiji group." According to Mayr (Birds of the South-west Pacific) neither species is recorded from those islands.

So much for Buller's evidence. It is unfortunate that he gives no precise dates, and his identification is not always to be trusted.

The next source of information is the Auckland Museum, which contains six skins, locally obtained between 1879 and 1897, four from Manukau by T. F. Cheeseman and his brother, and two from Whakatane by Liardet. Although the data on their labels are not all that could be wished, these skins are valuable in that they provide the first concrete evidence of long northward movement of black-fronted terns and offer a hint that Auckland is annually visited by a few individuals of this predominantly South Island bird. (a) 26/6/1879, Manukau, juv. (b) 3/7/1884, Manukau, female, almost in full plumage. (c) Winter, 1886, Manukau, juv. (d) Winter, 1886, Manukau, ? male, assuming breeding plumage. (e) Winter, 1897, Whakatane, juv., assuming adult plumage.

(f) Winter, 1897, Whakatane, ♀ ad. in winter plumage, moulting into spring plumage.

Almost a quarter of a century elapses before the next recorded occurrence. Dr. R. A. Falla has informed me that on 10/11/21 he saw a black-fronted tern flying in the Waitemata off North Head.

During recent years an increase in observers around Auckland has led to a corresponding increase in records. These are:— (a) 10/3/40, Muriwai Stream, five; this is the earliest autumn appearance; and also the nearest approach to a flock recorded in recent years.—C. A. Fleming, P. C. Bull and R.B.S. (b) 17/11/40, Muriwai Stream. One juv. This and Dr. Falla's November record suggest that some non-breeding juveniles may linger well to the north of the breeding grounds; as happens with some wrybills and S.I. pied oystercatchers; and *mutatis mutandis*, with some godwits, knots and possibly Arctic skuas.—C. A. Fleming, W. Ridland and R.B.S. (c) 6/5/41, Pouto, N. Kaipara. One juv. This is the most northerly record. The bird was frequenting a pool tucked away between shifting sand-dunes and the consolidated country. A double note sounding like swit-week or kit-week was heard.—W. Ridland and R.B.S. (d) 5/5/43, Te Henga. One was sitting on the beach among white-fronted terns. It could not be found next day.—H. B. Lusk, Mrs. J. W. Sibson and R.B.S.

In view of Buller's remark that he had seen black-fronted terns at Maketu and Liardet's specimens collected at Whakatane, it is a matter for satisfaction that these birds may still be found on that stretch of the Bay of Plenty coast. On the two occasions when I have visited that area I have seen black-fronted terns. On 8/9/40, W. Ridland and I watched two immature birds flying up and down the estuary of the Rangitaiki River. Again, on 15/5/47, four flew across the Whakatane Road, near Thornton, a few miles from the Rangitaiki River, dipped buoyantly over some sodden pastures and disappeared inland.

The wintering of black-fronted terns in the Bay of Plenty raises the question whether a few pairs may not be breeding in the North Island. Black-billed gulls (*Larus bulleri*), their associates on the river beds of the South Island, are evidently flourishing on the volcanic plateau, large tracts of which are ornithologically almost unknown. From Buller's account it is clear that black-fronted terns were breeding in the North Island last century. In the second edition there occurs this significant passage: "On the habits of this species far inland Captain Mair has sent me the following interesting note: 'During the calm summer evenings in December, 1879, I observed hundreds of these little birds flying round the clumps of black birch trees which here and there dot the course of the Takiahuru Stream, running through the Murimotu-Karioi Plain on the south-east base of Ruapehu mountain. . . Both in that month and in the preceding one I found numbers of the young of this species lying or squatting on the sandbanks far up the course of the Whangaehu River.' " More recently, Stead, in "The Life Histories of New Zealand Birds," writes: "I have seen it on the Waiouru Plains; and have often wondered that it was not a more plentiful bird in that locality as is the case in similar country in the South Island."

Finally, I should like to make a comment on the taxonomic status of the black-fronted tern, or, as Guthrie-Smith calls it, the inland tern. Its habits, manner of flight and general morphology group it with the marsh terns; and although Alexander (*Birds of the Ocean*, p. 167) somewhat surprisingly calls it a *Sterna*, Oliver rightly retained it in the genus *Chlidonias*. Across the world there are three recognised marsh terns, the black (*C. niger*), a West Palaearctic and Nearctic species; the white-winged black (*C. leucopterus*) a Palaearctic species, creeping down into Australia and New Zealand; and the whiskered (*C. hybrida*), a South Palaearctic, Ethiopian, Oriental and Australian species. Both *C. niger* and *C. leucopterus* are fine-billed species, but *C. hybrida* has a much robuster bill, as has also *albistriata*. It may, indeed, have been its robust bill which led Alexander to place *albistriata* in the genus *Sterna*. The morphological similarity between *hybrida* and *albistriata* is

obvious at a glance in the field, and it is worth noting that the black-fronted tern was called *hybrida* as long ago as 1867 in the *Journal für Ornithologie* by Finsch, whose connection with N.Z. ornithology is perpetuated in the name of the South Island riverbed oystercatcher (*H. O. finschi*). *Hybrida* has an extensive range, and is represented in Australia by the subspecies *fluviatilis*. I would, therefore, suggest that the black-fronted tern be recognised as a subspecies of the whiskered tern, and that its full name is *Chlidonias hybrida albistriata* Gray.

SUMMARY.

- 1.—The evidence comes from (a) the works of Sir Walter Buller; (b) six skins in the Auckland Museum; (c) recent observations.
- 2.—Records for the west coast of Auckland and the Bay of Plenty near Whakatane go back into the nineteenth century.
- 3.—The earliest date is March 10 and the latest November 17.
- 4.—The majority of birds are juveniles, some of which may summer north of the breeding grounds.
- 5.—There is evidence that black-fronted terns used to nest in the North Island; and there may still be isolated pairs or small colonies breeding in suitable country.
- 6.—The suggestion is made that the black-fronted tern is a subspecies of the whiskered tern (*C. hybrida*).

BIRD LIFE AT PUERUA, SOUTH OTAGO.

By Dunedin Naturalists' Field Club.

On "Jura Place", Puerua, South Otago, about 52 acres of native bush for almost 57 years have been kept as a private bird sanctuary.

Riflemen (*Acanthisitta chloris*), yellow-breasted tits (*Petroica m. macrocephala*) and fantails (*Rhipidura fuliginosa*) are present in small numbers and are much less numerous than they were several years ago. Two small flocks of brown creepers (*Finschia novaeseelandiae*) frequented the bush four years ago. A few were seen in 1945, and though not again actually seen, in the New Year, 1947, were heard high up in the trees. Bellbirds (*Anthornis melanura*) are particularly numerous and appear to be increasing. In June, 1945, ten at a time were counted singing and playing near the back door where they are fed. Tuis (*Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae*) are holding their own. In the autumn of 1946 they all disappeared for a time, but after a few weeks they returned and were again plentiful. A few wood pigeons (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*) are always about. In March, 1946, seven were seen in flight together.

A parrakeet (*Cyanoramphus* sp.) was heard and seen in flight the same day. On October 21, 1946, a call, believed to be that of a shining cuckoo (*Chalcites lucidus*) was heard. The call was heard definitely on October 28 and not again during the whole season. Records of first calls for previous years are: 1945, October 16; 1944, Oct. 25; 1943, Oct. 28. Moreporks (*Ninox novaeseelandiae*) are heard calling at night; particularly so in October, 1946.

Pukekos (*Porphyrio porphyrio*) are very numerous in the Otanomomo Swamp. The west end is about half a mile from "Jura Place," and the swamp stretches in an easterly direction for miles towards the sea. Over a year ago, after a flood, 46 pukekos were counted in one paddock.

Thrushes (*Turdus ericetorum*), blackbirds (*T. merula*) and starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) are numerous and increasing. Starlings seem to have little sense. Every year they litter the woolshed with grass, etc. They apparently try to build a nest on a beam high in the shed; the material falls off, but they continue their efforts until there is a great heap on the floor and, of course, nothing on the beam. Redpolls (*Carduelis cabaret*), chaffinches (*Fringilla coelebs*), yellowhammers (*Emberiza citrinella*), greenfinches (*Chloris chloris*), and goldfinches (*Carduelis carduelis*) are all noted at times, the redpolls being the most plentiful. On March 27, 1944, a goldfinch was seen with three young ones.