

## SUMMARY.

1. This paper summarises the past and present (1947 and early 1948) distribution of the myna (*Acridotheres tristis*).
2. It is the result of an investigation carried out amongst members of the Ornithological Society of New Zealand and others—in all 98 co-operators took part.
3. In the Wairarapa the myna is confined to five towns and is probably dying out, or at most, barely holding its own.
4. In Hawke's Bay—East Cape the limits are from Dannevirke to the coast in the south to Te Araroa in the north. The population nowhere extends far inland into the hills and is more or less stable, being exceedingly numerous in parts.
5. In Manawatu—Taranaki the myna is not numerous south of Wanganui, though extending to Foxton. In small numbers up two inland watersheds, the northern limit is reached on the coast at Mt. Messenger. Numbers seem to be stabilised.
6. The aggressively expanding Waikato population is encroaching into the Auckland suburbs, and is bordered elsewhere at Tauranga, the Mamaku Bush, the Atiamuri Bush, Taumarunui and Awakino.
7. Mynas had disappeared completely from the South Island by the beginning of the present century.

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## A VISIT TO FAREWELL SPIT.

By R. H. D. Stidolph, Masterton.

Farewell Spit, a renowned haunt of waders, had long held a vision in my mind of an ornithological treat in store and when I was on holiday in the Golden Bay district in October, 1946, by a fortunate set of circumstances I was able to spend a day at the tip of the Spit, beyond the lighthouse, in an area where the shore birds assemble at high tide. I never before saw so many interesting birds in one day, in spite of having fears that my visit might have been too early in the season to see waders in any numbers.

Probably no more prolific feeding ground for waders exists in any other part of New Zealand and it is some satisfaction to know that the whole of the Spit and its tidal flats have been proclaimed a sanctuary. Section 33 of the Reserves and other Lands Disposal Act, 1938, declared an area of 4,397 acres of Crown land on the Spit as reserved for the preservation of flora and fauna, authorised the reservation by Order-in-Council as a sanctuary of areas between high and low water marks in the vicinity and made special provisions for the care and protection of all the areas. Since the legislation was passed the tidal flats concerned have been defined by survey and set apart by Order-in-Council as a reserve, a sanctuary for the preservation of wild life. Their area is some 23,300 acres.

I arrived at Takaka on the evening of October 8, and as a good augury of things to come, I was delighted to hear, from the hotel, the

call of the weka (*Gallirallus australis*). The next day I spent at the mouth of the Takaka River, where the presence of a flock of 34 bar-tailed godwits (*Limosa lapponica*) indicated that this bird had arrived from the Northern Hemisphere. Also recorded here were four blue herons (*Demigretta sacra*), nine plus black-backed gulls (*Larus dominicanus*), 37 small gulls, probably red-billed (*Larus novaehollandiae*), 38 grey ducks (*Anas poicilorhyncha*), 17 black shags (*Phalacrocorax carbo*), ~~six plus white-throated shags~~ (*P. melanoleucos*) one of which had a white breast, four white-fronted terns (*Sterna striata*) and four banded dotterels (*Charadrius bicinctus*). ~~Also reported in this locality though I did not see the bird, was the white-faced heron~~ (*Notonhox novae-hollandiae*).

In the vicinity of Takaka were the bell-bird (*Anthornis melanura*), tui (*Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae*), pipit (*Anthus novaeseelandiae*), pied and black fantails (*Rhipidura fuliginosa*), kingfisher (*Halcyon sanctus*), silver-eye (*Zosterops lateralis*), pukeko (*Porphyrio porphyrio*), grey warbler (*Pseudogerygone igata*), native pigeon (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*), shining cuckoo (*Chalcites lucidus*), one was heard calling on October 10 on the banks of the Takaka River; and Caspian tern (*Hydroprogne caspia*).

I arrived at Collingwood on October 11 and in the early morning of the next day heard a bittern (*Botaurus poiciloptilus*) booming in the Aorere River flats. On the estuary were about 350 godwits in several flocks; eight South Island pied oyster catchers (*Haematopus finschi*), two white-fronted terns, three red-billed gulls, two grey ducks, two white-throated shags (one with a mottled breast), a gannet (*Morus serrator*) and about 50 black-backed gulls. The following morning a shining cuckoo was calling persistently near the hotel. Six white-throated shags were recorded that day, two having white breasts. The number of red-billed gulls increased to seven and of the South Island pied oystercatcher to 29, besides two black oystercatchers, probably (*H. unicolor*). Eight pied oystercatchers took off to the south, flying fairly high and strung out. Five Caspian terns, three black swans (*Cygnus atratus*) and two banded dotterels completed the day's count. At 6.50, just before darkness fell on the scene, 13 godwits left, gradually gaining height, circling and repeatedly changing formation until they were about 1,500 to 2,000 feet up. Then they strung out and disappeared in the direction of Takaka, into the dimming sky and following the coast line.

At Rockville, a farming district five miles inland from Collingwood, in stunted manuka areas on the hills, the fern-bird (*Bowdleria punctata*) still persists. Although I did not see it myself in a brief search for it, a farmer there who knows the bird told me that he had seen it on his property at the beginning of 1946. It was there 20 years earlier; two specimens which I saw in a private museum there were obtained in the same locality. A later communication from my farmer friend stated that five fern-birds were seen shortly after my visit. Also in this area were the weka and the bellbird. The next day on the Aorere River mudflats I saw a kingfisher catch three crabs within five minutes, the last one being picked up in flight as the bird flew upstream towards some bush.

I had made inquiries regarding a visit to Farewell Spit and ascertained that a weekly mail-car service had been started from Collingwood about six months earlier. But what was most fortunate was the fact that this week, on October 16, as the Commissioner of Crown Lands for the Nelson district and other officials were making an inspection of Crown lands on the Spit, the mail-car would remain at the lighthouse over high tide. That meant instead of spending only half-an-hour at the lighthouse, I would be able to pass the greater part of the day there.

October 16 broke dull, and glancing out of the hotel window I saw 13 black shags on a half-submerged log in midstream of the Aorere River but it was not an unlucky omen. Leaving Collingwood at about 8 a.m. (the mail-car runs to suit the tide, it being possible to reach the lighthouse only when the tide is out) the route is through a narrow strip of settled country between the sea and the hills to Puponga, an erstwhile

mining village. Here a blue heron was disturbed from a tidal creek which had to be forded. After a jolting crossing over a rough track at the base of the Spit through sandhills growing lupin, flax, etc., in the course of which the car managed to hang together, though giving every appearance of being likely to collapse entirely, a beautiful hard beach was reached on the western side of the Spit. Once there, the car glided along a natural speedway to the lighthouse, about 13 miles away. Along the Spit on this side were odd black-backed gulls, a few parties of South-Island pied oystercatchers (8, 1, 5, 4, and 3), three black oystercatchers, and three Caspian terns.

The rendezvous of the waders on Farewell Spit, when the tide is in, is an area near the tip, where an island known as Shelly Banks provides a breeding ground for terns and gulls. Immediately after being hospitably entertained by the principal keeper, Mr. P. E. White, who provided morning tea for the whole party, he directed me to my destination. The tide was coming in and I waded across to Shelly Banks. The first thing I saw as I approached was a cloud of gulls and terns. On reaching the island, at the near end, was a black swan's nest with five eggs.

The air was full of birds, hundreds of them. There were about 800 white-fronted terns in two colonies of 500 and 300 each; they were preparing to breed; a few scrapes were seen. The birds were screaming vociferously as I approached and they presented a beautiful sight. Associated with them were about 350 red-billed gulls in two parties, 250 and 100 respectively, the larger number being with the larger block of terns. At the southern end of this colony the gulls had started to nest; there were 18 nests with eggs, one with three, eleven with two, and six with one egg; many more were empty or in process of construction. One nest had a spiral shell lying with its two eggs. A colony of about 50 Caspian terns was also just starting to breed. Seven nests were seen with eggs, five with one egg each and two with two. One broken egg was quite fresh.

As the tide was coming in I could not remain long on the island, and wading back, I was in time to see hundreds of waders flying in from their feeding grounds on the south-eastern side of the Spit. Flocks of various sizes were arriving and packing into big congregations on the beach, above high water. There were just as many knots (*Calidris canutus*) as godwits. The assemblage increased gradually until there were at least 750 of each species. Also there were about 500 South Island pied oystercatchers in one compact flock, accompanied by two larger, all-black oystercatchers (probably *unicolor*). The pied birds, in their clear cut black and white plumage presented a glorious sight in flight. I was told that this bird did not breed on the Spit but that the black one did.

Another wader seen was the turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*). One flock of 20 was recorded, besides other parties of 8, 4, and 3, feeding on moist sand. They were very inconspicuous and could easily have been missed. Several were seen resting with mixed flocks of godwits and knots, which also had an odd red-billed gull or pied oystercatcher among them.

Around the lighthouse, where there are some large pine trees, there was a surprising number of introduced birds of the more widely-spread species. Also there was the weka, with half-grown young, and this bird was reported to be numerous all along the Spit. Fourteen black swans were seen off the Spit. A harrier (*Circus approximans*) was also noted.

The actual introduced species recorded here were:—Greenfinch (*Chloris chloris*), starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), blackbird (*Turdus merula*), song thrush (*T. ericetorum*), chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*), redpoll (*Carduelis cabaret*), sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), skylark (*Alda arvensis*), and hedge sparrow (*Prunella modularis*). No doubt a more extended sojourn in the area would add to this list. The above species were recorded in the Collingwood-Takaka area as well and in addition, the following: Yellowhammer (*Emberiza citrinella*), Californian quail (*Lophortyx californicus*) and goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*). I saw no

sign of the magpie (*Gymnorhina* sp.) in the district nor did I meet anyone who had; I was told it was not present.

I left Collingwood the next day; the stoppage of the service car on Takaka Hill owing to radiator trouble, enabled me to add the tomtit (*Petroica m. macrocephala*) to the list of birds seen.

It is of interest to recall that when the late Mr. H. Guthrie-Smith visited Farewell Spit and the Collingwood district in 1924 (vide "Sorrows and Joys of a New Zealand Naturalist," pp. 48-53) he identified the small gulls then breeding on Bird Island, Collingwood, as the black-billed species (*Larus bulleri*). The small gulls I saw in this district were definitely red-billed and I never saw a black-billed gull (*bulleri*). At Shelly Banks he recorded several hundred Caspian terns breeding, but no other terns, and a few black-backed gulls. On Bird Island he saw several hundred godwits, 500 to 600 pied oystercatchers, some black oystercatchers, and he recorded as breeding on this island less than 100 pairs of Caspian tern, 12,000 to 15,000 white-fronted terns, 3,000 to 4,000 black-billed gulls, and half a dozen pairs of black-backed gulls. I was not able to visit Bird Island but through binoculars the only birds I could see flying over and settling on the island were Caspian terns in small numbers.

In the second week of November, 1919, when Mr. L. L. Redick, a visitor from America, spent two days at Cape Farewell lighthouse, according to his observations published by the late Mr. James Drummond in his "Nature Notes" column in the "Auckland Weekly News" (December 27, 1919) the Caspian tern, white-fronted tern, black-backed gull and red-billed gull were breeding on Shelly Banks, though he expressed the opinion that they were in much smaller numbers than formerly. Earlier reference in the same column by Mr. H. P. Washbourne, of Sumner, described the great change that had come over the Spit compared with what it was originally, when "there were," he wrote, "long parallel ridges of stunted bush, about 20 feet high. Between the ridges were long shallow lagoons, about knee-deep, with grass, flax and other plants filling up the hollow. . . The scene has changed indeed. The Spit now was a mass of bare driving sand. In some places the old wooded ranges showed a ghastly row of bare, dead branches, the pretty hollows were filled up with drifting sand, and only occasionally was a bird seen, making the countless numbers of former years seem incredible."

In spite of the changed conditions, as indicated above, much of interest remains, though the tremendous difference in the numbers of birds originally found in the district, compared with those of 1924 (Mr. Guthrie Smith) and those of my visit in 1946 is not very reassuring. I am referring more particularly to the gulls and terns. Perhaps some practical action can be taken to restore the vegetation on the Spit.

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## REVIEWS.

**Darwin's Finches, by David Lack. Camb. Univ. Press, 1947.**

Darwin's finches are important birds. It was his observations on these birds of the Galapagos, and on the giant tortoises and other animals there which began the train of Darwin's thought that led to "The Origin of Species." Since Darwin's day these birds have been studied by a number of other workers. This book embodies the results of the work of David Lack on the living birds in 1938-39, and his study of skins and other material in American and British museums. I would not be surprised if it comes to be regarded as a landmark in ornithological research. Darwin's finches are a group of birds closely related and much alike in colouring, nesting and courting habits, etc., and differing mainly in beak-form, size, and the food they eat. They inhabit the Galapagos Islands and Cocos Island, and are of great interest to the student of evolution. Lack reduces the 6 genera of Swarth to 4, retaining the rejected genera as sub-genera, and similarly reduces several species to sub-specific status. The whole book is so closely packed with thought-provoking material that it is hard to single out points for comment.