

BIRD LIFE AT GOVERNOR'S BAY, BANKS PENINSULA

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Governor's Bay, situated near the head of Lyttelton Harbour, provides a typical example of a locality where certain species of native birds have become completely or almost extinct owing to the opening up of the area by settlement.

The Bay is made even more interesting for ornithologists since it was here that T. H. Potts (1824-88), author of "Out in the Open," lived and made many of his notes and observations on our birds. Potts, a first-class field naturalist, arrived in New Zealand in 1854, moved to Ohinitahi, Governor's Bay, in 1856, and has left us an invaluable record of many interesting birds, especially important notes on their nesting habits. It is of great interest today to note his painstaking observations on rapidly disappearing species.

There are several bush-clad gullies running down, from the hills backing the bay, towards the harbour which here consists mainly of wide mudflats. Between these gullies are open areas of tussock land with rocky outcrops, parts formerly covered with bracken, manuka scrub and flax. The great majority of the trees and shrubs are native, and include: Kowhai, tree-fuchsia, whitey-wood, matipo, golden ake-ake, bush lawyer, ribbon wood, manuka, five-finger and cabbage trees, etc.

The scene in this charming, historic, bay has changed quite markedly since first the Maori and then the pakeha beheld its unspoiled beauty and made their homes there.

Erosion on the "Hills of the Seven Sleepers" above the bay, burning of vegetation, etc., and silt dumping and dredging at Lyttelton, all brought down soil and debris into the bay. All this had its effect on the bird life and several species now no longer frequent the beaches and bush clad gullies as in days of yore.

At low tide the mudflats stretch far out, leaving the 300 yards long jetty exposed. In favourable weather, red and black-billed gulls crowd the shore feeding on scraps thrown to them by picnickers, and when not so favoured, content themselves by delving in the soft mud for crabs, worms and small fish. White-fronted terns sit on the jetty and, as the tide rolls in, swoop in and out of the water, feeding in their turn. When the tide is full the jetty often presents a remarkable picture with two long rows of gulls and terns sitting there and calling lustily when one walks amongst them.

The black-backed gulls nest in various localities, the nearest to the Bay being Manson's Peninsula, while some of the smaller species of gulls nest on cliffs at Quail Island in the harbour. The terns also appear to nest here.

Penguins and shags are often seen as visitors to the Bay. The spotted shags presumably come from colonies around Whitewash Head, Sumner, while the penguins nest in certain little coves round the harbour. Very occasionally, other species of shags drift over from the Lake Ellesmere district also.

In former years, the little gullies, clad in various types of trees and shrubs were the haunts of many interesting native birds. Tuis and bell-birds were very abundant as were fantails, native thrushes, robins, wrens, tits and warblers, while wekas and native quail with a few kakas and many native pigeons could be found. The red-fronted parrakeet was also to be seen in most places here in the early days of settlement.

This area still provides an interesting scene for the close study of native birds, and, fortunately, some species are still as observable as in T. H. Potts's time.

List of species now found at Governor's Bay:—

White-flipped Penguin (*Eudyptula albosignata*)—Stragglers, usually from Diamond Harbour, are observed quite frequently. In previous

years they have been known to nest under sheds in the Bay, but we have no record of nesting sites here in the last few years. Potts mentions that they used to breed in this area in November, December and January, and discusses their nesting habits. We are of the opinion that this species is on the decrease.

Black Shag (*Phalacrocorax carbo*).—Stragglers sometimes visit the Bay, usually in pairs, but not so commonly as in former years, when it bred in the vicinity.

Spotted Shag (*Stictocorbo punctatus punctatus*).—This is a very frequent visitor and provides an interesting spectacle when fishing. Potts records its nesting habits in his "Out in the Open."

Grey Duck (*Anas poicilorhyncha*).—This species is occasionally seen in the slow-flowing creeks of Allandale—ornithologically part of the Bay—but it is not as abundant as might be expected. Needless to say there are more of these birds here in the shooting season, seeking refuge from their hunters.

Harrier (*Circus approximans*).—Numerous, especially around the craggy tops of "The Seven Sleepers." Its main diet is dead sheep and rabbits run over on the Dyer's Pass and Summit roads. Potts remembers "a fine old sage" that used to haunt the neighbourhood "making requisitions on our poultry yard" until he was "converted into a beautiful specimen!"

White-fronted Tern (*Sterna striata*).—It is the only tern found here and is plentiful about the jetty feeding on shoals of small herring. We have found nests of this bird high up on the eastern and north-eastern cliffs of Quail Island. T. H. Potts stated that formerly it bred in several parts of Lyttelton Harbour and was common at Governor's Bay.

Black-backed Gull (*Larus dominicanus*).—It is becoming increasingly common and is the only sea bird nesting in the immediate vicinity. It appears that the gulls nest unusually late here—about late December. They seem to feed on almost any sort of organic waste.

Red-billed Gull (*Larus novaehollandiae*).—Like the black-billed gull, it gets its food in part from the abattoirs and from the picnickers at the nearby bathing resort—Corsair Bay. This gull has always been very abundant on our shores.

Black-billed Gull (*Larus bulleri*).—This bird is surprisingly common here and seems to get a fair proportion of its food from the abattoirs nearby as well as feeding in the mud. Its habits appear to be quite similar to those of the red-billed gull but an interesting point arises. Here, at the head of the harbour, it is as common as the red-billed gull, while at the Lyttelton side of the harbour the latter species predominates. On the opposite side of the harbour from Lyttelton, the black-billed gull is commoner.

Shining Cuckoo (*Chalcites lucidus*).—Present in summer for the usual period, but is difficult to see as it keeps to the tree tops. It feeds on the grubs infesting certain kowhai trees whenever possible. Potts in his diary says: "1 Jan. (1865). The boys brought in a teetotum's nest with a young whistler in it which proves it to be a cuckoo."

Morepork (*Ninox novaeseelandiae*).—Apparently only one colony now, in gum trees behind the hotel, but they are heard in several parts of the area. T. H. Potts says: "For some years but little was known of its breeding habits. Early in the summer of 1871 two young birds were found in an old decayed tree in the forest by Cooper's Knobs (above the bay). . . . An old breeding place at Ohinitahi furnished castings: from an examination of these, which contained remains of mice, cicadae, coleopterae, etc., it appeared probable that spiders taken in their webs formed some portion of their food."

Kingfisher (*Halcyon sanctus*).—There are plenty of these birds around the shore where they nest in clay banks and feed from the mud, collecting crabs, small fish and worms. Potts records in one season that

the first egg was laid on October 10, and the sixth and last on the 17th. In the 1872 season he knew of three nests containing in each seven eggs, one nest with six and another with five.

Pipit (*Anthus novaeseelandiae*).—It is not common and is apparently confined entirely to the tussock-covered steeps. Potts records in 1882 that it was not so plentiful as it was years ago.

Grey Warbler (*Pseudogerygone igata*).—This bird is rarely observed, its call being more often heard than it is seen. We have only seen it three times in two years, both times in the summer, although we have heard its call very frequently and it is probably quite abundant. Potts stated that it seemed purely insectivorous, not troubling the fruit-grower, "very little planting or gardening is needed to attract its presence."

Fantail (*Rhipidura fuliginosa*).—The two phases are very tame although they keep under cover most of the time, preferring the native bush; the pied phase is still the commoner, as it was in Potts's times when it was "fairly abundant and of familiar ways," ridding the houses of flies in the autumn weeks. He believed that it bred two or three times in the course of the season.

White-eye (*Zosterops lateralis*).—Very common, especially in winter when they gather in small groups and keep near the houses, whence they get most of their food in this season. Nevertheless, it is apparent that a large number die during the winter. Potts states that having cleared away large numbers of insects in season, it takes its retaining fee by sampling the tempting ripe fruit.

Tui (*Prothemadera novaeseelandiae*).—This species is probably the most common native bird found here and if it increased much more would probably be disliked on account of its liking for ripe fruit.

Bell-bird (*Anthornis melanura*).—This is another fairly common bird in the area, and, like the tui, is very fearless and tame. Potts records it as a "lover of honey, eater of drupes and berries, yet hath a wondrous relish for insect food!"

Native birds now no longer found in the area or very irregular visitors:—

These birds were all to be found here in the early days of settlement and some of the old identities of the Bay can remember when many of them were abundant, especially the weka.

Mutton Bird (*Puffinus griseus*).—Once haunted our shores and may possibly have nested. On rare occasions other petrels and shearwaters are blown in as stragglers.

Pied Shag (*Phalacrocorax varius*).—Recorded here by Potts as common but less gregarious than the spotted shag. It is now very rarely seen south of the Waimakariri River.

White-throated Shag (*Phalacrocorax melanoleucos*).—This bird often used to come over from Lake Ellesmere in the early days, but is now apparently confined to the area round Lake Forsyth on the south side of Banks Peninsula.

Bittern (*Botaurus poiciloptilus*).—Its "boom" was a familiar sound in the swamp areas in the early days.

Paradise Duck (*Tadorna variegata*).—One of us (I.D.R.C.) remembers, several years ago, when they commonly flew over the area towards evening. T. H. Potts says that they were often "heard in lofty flight."

Bush Hawk (*Falco novaeseelandiae*).—Potts mentions, "amongst the things that were," breeding stations of this bird at Cass's Peak (above the Bay) and also in the Bay itself.

New Zealand Quail (*Coturnix novaeseelandiae*).—This bird was abundant here very many years ago but was regarded as a favourite bird for shooting by the early settlers and they and the clearing of the land with fires are responsible for its extinction here, a few years after colonisation began in earnest.

Weka (*Gallirallus australis*).—Apparently a common sight for most of the latter half of last century.

Pukeko (*Porphyrio porphyrio*).—Presumably driven away by the encroachments of settlers and now found mainly in the more isolated swamps and roadside marshes towards Lake Ellesmere.

Oystercatchers (*Haematopus* spp.).—Very occasionally oystercatchers are seen, but it is rather unusual. Although there is still some doubt, due to insufficiency of material for taxonomic investigation, as to the correct nomenclature of each form, Potts, we find, recorded that the black species (*H. unicolor*) often used to be seen in little rocky coves in the Bay, usually in pairs, but was rare in comparison with the pied species (*H. longirostris*, now known as *H. finschi*) which could be heard often on January evenings.

Dotterels.—These were often to be seen on the shore in Potts's time. Presumably he referred to the banded species (*Charadrius bicinctus*).

Sandpipers.—Potts mentions having shot these on the mudflats. This, we presume to be the Siberian pectoral sandpiper (*Calidris acuminata*).

Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*).—Recorded by Potts as feeding amongst the zoster-covered mudflats as the tide ebbs. Godwits are seen in numbers on the coast near Christchurch but we have never seen them in the Bay.

Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*).—Common once on the mudflats and now very rarely seen. Its yelping cry could be heard often on summer evenings, according to T. H. Potts.

Pigeon (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*).—This bird may still be present in the very denser parts of the bush but we have never seen or heard of it and we fear that it, too, has departed with the onrush of civilisation, as it is called.

Kaka (*Nestor meridionalis*).—The late Mr. Edgar Stead said that until 1912 it still inhabited the bush on Mt. Herbert, near Governor's Bay, but the increasing numbers of opossums there caused it to depart.

Red-fronted Parrakeet (*Cyanorhampus novaeseelandiae*).—Old identities can remember when large flocks of them were to be seen at times here. It apparently disappeared completely towards the end of last century and is now very rare anywhere in Canterbury.

Long-tailed Cuckoo (*Eudynamis taitensis*).—This bird has become very much rarer over the past few years and is now rarely heard of in the vicinity.

Laughing Owl (*Sceloglaux albifacies*).—This bird was present to some extent here in the early days but rapidly vanished.

Rifleman (*Acanthisitta chloris*).—It was fairly numerous until comparatively recent times. Potts mentions the twittering song of this little bird.

N.Z. Thrush (*Turnagra capensis*).—"Ten years at least have passed since we heard of its occurrence in this neighbourhood."—Potts, 1882.

Fernbird (*Bowdleria punctata*).—This bird was still to be seen towards the close of last century, but has now disappeared completely.

Yellow-breasted Tit (*Petroica macrocephala macrocephala*).—Potts says of it here that "larvae of grasshoppers, chafers, and beetles form the chief part of their prey." On April 10, 1949, Mrs. Frances Cresswell reported a pair of these birds in Ford's Bush, in the north-west corner of the Bay. We, ourselves, found, on April 24, two birds, male and female, in the same locality. It appears that we have not lost this interesting bird and there is always the possibility of its increasing somewhat if the bush is kept intact, as we sincerely hope it will be.

Robin (*Miro australis*).—This bird was very common everywhere here very many years ago but has long since gone.

Saddleback (*Creacion carunculatus*).—Commonly met with in the early days but, as the area became deforested, it disappeared quickly.

Orange-wattled Crow (*Calleas cinerea cinerea*).—Present once but driven away very quickly by the approach of colonists.

Introduced birds present:—

The relative rate of increase of the introduced birds is a matter of great interest to the many fruit-growers in this area and a considerable amount of damage would be done were it not for the large amount of protective netting that is erected to save the crops and fruit trees.

Black Swan (*Cygnus atratus*).—They are present in immense numbers on the nearby Lake Ellesmere and occasionally we have seen immature birds on the harbour.

Californian Quail (*Lophortyx californicus*).—There are plenty of these birds here although they keep to themselves under cover, preferring the bracken on the hillsides and are sometimes encountered on the road especially on fine warm days. We have sometimes had the pleasure of seeing the two parent birds running across the road followed by about twelve little chicks. Potts says in his entries, "25 Nov. (1865). E.P. (his wife) brought the pair of Californian quail with her from Mr. Hill; they are beautiful birds."

Rock Pigeon (*Columba livia*).—Commonly seen in flocks of 50-60 about the craggy tops of "The Seven Sleepers." We have not located any nesting sites as yet.

Greenfinch (*Chloris chloris*).—This is to be seen in small groups usually in summer, but is uncommon. Potts records a greenfinch with young on January 29, 1865.

Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*).—Usually seen in pairs about the paths or diving after insects.

Redpoll (*Carduelis cabaret*).—This bird is also common in small groups, keeping more especially to the broom bushes and grass.

Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*).—Quite common, usually being seen in groups of six or eight, especially in summer or early autumn.

House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*).—It is the commonest exotic bird here and its harmful qualities exceed its beneficial ones. It is often an amusing sight to see residents standing guard over their fowl runs at feeding time to prevent the sparrows from seizing the grain from amongst the fowl.

Yellow-hammer (*Emberiza citrinella*).—Seen amongst the grass in the summer but does not seem to be harmful to farmers, perhaps on account of its smaller numbers.

Thrush (*Turdus ericetorum*).—Common. Usually seen in company with blackbirds although not among the fruit trees in such numbers. Potts says, "27 Nov. (1865). Gave Trounce £5/5/- to buy the cock thrush from that fellow Fitton and after much talk he got it."

Blackbird (*Turdus merula*).—This is also a common bird and although not generally so noticeable as the starling, it is a great pest to the orchardist, eating the ripening fruit in large numbers. It was brought here from sentimental association with the Old Country. Potts apparently was instrumental in procuring the first pair for the area from Melbourne. He also apparently introduced the first chaffinches here.

Hedge Sparrow (*Prunella modularis*).—Rarely seen. Confines itself largely to the gorse bushes and hedges.

Lark (*Alauda arvensis*).—Very common on the farms, especially the hillside grazing paddocks. "Heard and saw the skylark."—(Potts, 11/7/1865).

Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*).—This bird is all too common in the eyes of most residents, making itself a particular nuisance in the spring when it nests in any available cranny in sheds and houses. Large flocks of

these birds are often to be seen winging their way across the sky towards evening in the summer.

White-backed Magpie (*Gymnorhina hypoleuca*).—Common. They seem to prefer to dwell in the bluegum trees—perhaps because it resembles their Australian conditions.

Black-backed Magpie (*G. tibicen*).—Very rarely seen. We do not think it breeds in the immediate vicinity.

Thus we have recorded 17 native and 16 introduced birds which are more or less regularly found here, with 27 species, recorded by T. H. Potts and other early residents, which are now either extinct or very rarely grace our shores. So we conclude with an extract from a paper read by T. H. Potts in December, 1872, before the Philosophical Institute of Canterbury, which expresses our feelings also in a better way than we could word them:—

“Living close to the beach in a sheltered nook in Port Cooper (i.e., Lyttelton Harbour) . . . it may be that I have been more than usually attentive to these wandering voices, since few woodland birds now frequent the slopes of our picturesque hills, like many other districts once clothed with stately trees and bright-leaved shrubs. Shade and shelter gone, bare stems with whitened tops remain, and point to the work of the ruthless bushman.”

BREEDING OF NATIVE PIGEON.—A native pigeon (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandia*) has been reared within 40 yards of my house. The nest was built in a young, densely foliated totara tree about 20 feet high and was constructed entirely of small twigs which the adult birds collected from a young rata tree within 20 feet of my house. (Both the totara and rata were planted by myself.) The nest was started early in November. Several months elapsed before I dare climb the totara to investigate for fear of disturbing the birds, and I seldom saw the adults go to the tree. At last, I decided to take a peep, and there was a chick, about the size of a Californian quail with pin feathers coming through on the wings. On March 6 the young bird appeared to be full grown and a friend took a photograph of it. I was away for a week and on my return the young one had flown.—A. R. Annabell, Waitotara.

NORTHWARD MOVEMENT OF RED-BILLED GULLS.—On October 24, 1948, during a visit to the Far North, I noticed for the first time a movement of the red-billed gull (*Larus novaehollandiae*). When we left Scott's Point at about nine in the morning we were passing small flocks of these gulls every few minutes, flying north, in quite a business-like fashion. I did not take any notice for a while as it is usual for birds to move about on the beach, but it became increasingly obvious that it was a definite movement northwards of these birds, so I stopped and watched them. They did not make any attempt to settle but just flew straight along the beach in small flocks from half a dozen to about forty; I estimated that there must have been between 2000 and 3000 pass during the day. No doubt these birds were making for the Three Kings Islands for nesting. A few pairs had nests without eggs on a rock at Scott's Point. Red-billed gulls feeding along the beach made no attempt to join the flocks en route.—R. H. Michie, Kaitiaia.

STARLINGS NESTING ON TRACTOR.—Last year, one or more starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) had an urge to nest in the open tool box of the tractor which, at night, is covered with a waterproof cover. Most mornings I would have to throw out a nest, and on one occasion an egg was laid overnight. The fact that the tractor was left in different paddocks did not interfere with the nesting, but I do not know whether the tractor appealed to starlings in different territories or whether the same birds faithfully followed it. Once, after a few idle tractor days, there were four eggs and another time most of the engine was filled with nesting material.—A. J. Hodgkin, Moa Flat, Heriot.