

BIRDS OF THREE KINGS AND NEIGHBOURING WATERS

By G. A. Buddle, Auckland.

The following notes made during a recent short visit to the Three Kings are supplementary to the account recently published in a joint paper by E. G. Turbott and myself (Records of the Auckland Institute and Museum, Vol. 3, Nos. 4 and 5, December, 1948).

Landings were made on February 27, 1949, on Great King; March 1, on South-West King; and March 2, on Stella Rock (the westernmost of the Princes Islands). The landings were made in the company of Major M. E. Johnson from his yacht Rosemary, in which we had sailed from Auckland. Stella Rock had not previously been landed on, and proved of little interest from the ornithological standpoint. One bellbird was seen; no gannets nest on this rock and the red-billed gulls had all left with the exception of two or three belated fledglings.. Landings have



Photo: G. A. Buddle.

Approach through the archway, the recently discovered landing place on South-West King, is in the right foreground.

been made on South-West King on two previous occasions, first by the late T. F. Cheeseman in 1889, and secondly by the writer and M. E. Johnson in 1947. Both these landings were made at the extreme S.E. point of the island, which was considered the only possible place. It is very exposed and landing is only possible under very favourable weather conditions, but once ashore access to the top of the island is easy.

On this trip three attempts to land here failed, but a landing was eventually made at the north-west end of the island, at a spot not previously considered as a possible landing place, as it cannot be seen from the sea. It is probably usable at any time except during heavy northerlies or westerlies, so it may be worth while to describe it in detail for the benefit of future investigators. At the foot of the 600-ft. cliff which forms the northern point of the island is a cave about 75 feet wide by 30 feet high, and with five to ten fathoms of water. The

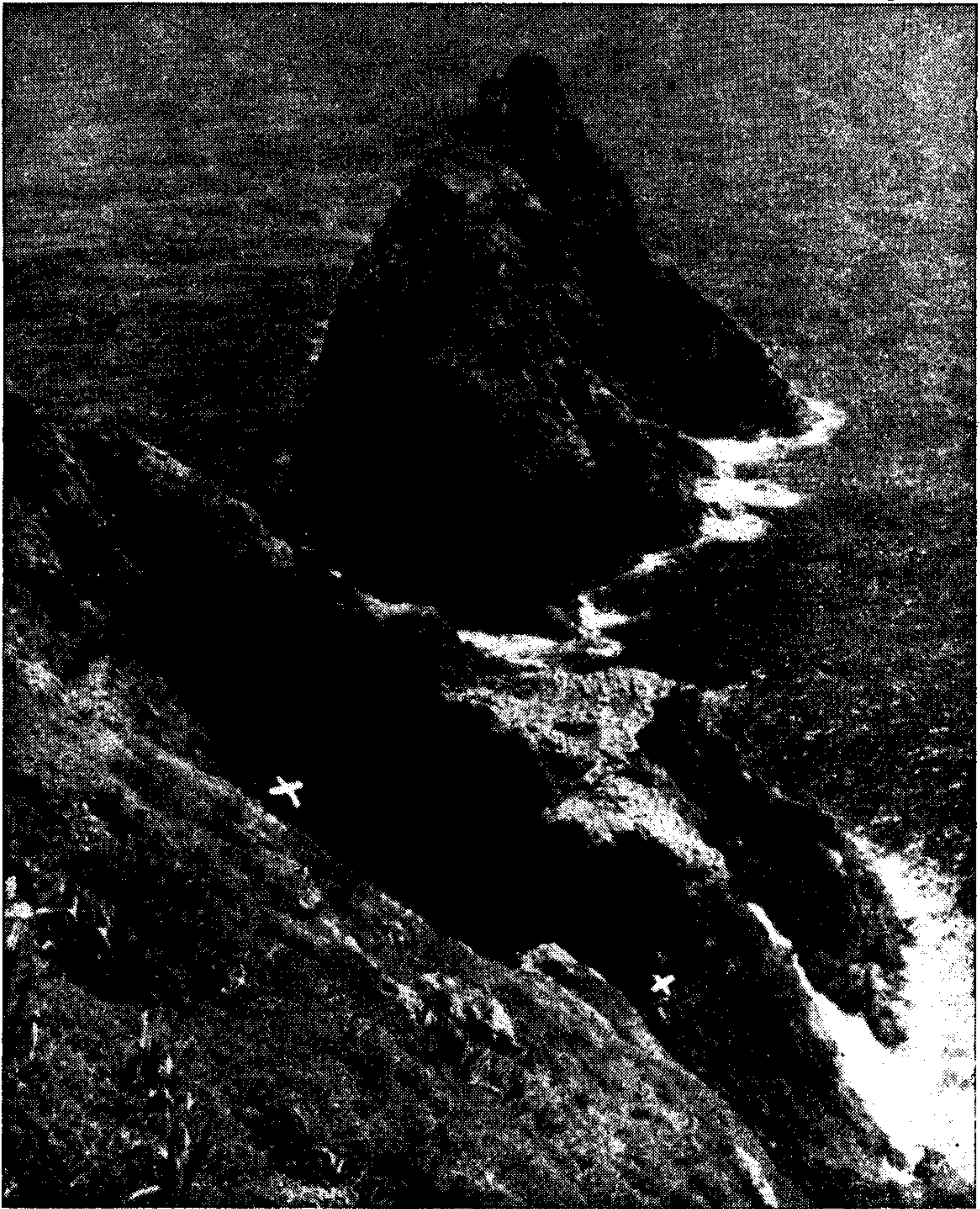


Photo: G. A. Buddle.

The northern part of the South-West King; the archway leading into the boat harbour and the landing marked with a X.

entrance to the cave is flanked on the north-east by a large rock joined by a low saddle to the island, and on the west by several outlying sunken rocks which help to protect the entrance. The cave is parallel to and very close to the eastern face of the island; about 100 feet in from the entrance the roof and outer side have collapsed for a distance of about 200 feet, leaving a sort of breakwater about 30 feet wide and 20 feet high, between the boat harbour and the outer coast, the inner side remaining a vertical cliff several hundred feet in height, and although the surge sweeps in and out of the cave, it does not break, and landing from a small dinghy is comparatively easy. On the other hand, access to the puka grove at the top of the island entails a very arduous and difficult, not to say dangerous, climb of 500 feet up an almost vertical cliff face with patches of ngaio, taupata, flax, etc., and a good deal of loose rock. Unfortunately, it is not possible to make a traverse and come out at a lower elevation.

SYSTEMATIC LIST.

Puffinus bulleri, Buller's Shearwater.—A few ranging birds were seen in the vicinity during the three days spent cruising through the group, but considerably less than I have observed during four previous seasons earlier in the year (December and January). It was noticeable that the numbers increased progressively as we approached the vicinity of the Poor Knights, both from the north and south, but even here, in the neighbourhood of their only known nesting ground, the numbers were only a fraction of those usually seen earlier in the year, giving the impression that the northern migration had already commenced by the middle of March.

Puffinus gavia, Fluttering Shearwater.—None found ashore in the burrows, and few heard calling at night while anchored in North-West Bay; however, at sea they were present in incredible numbers (similarly recorded by Falla at approximately the same date, Records of Auckland Institute and Museum, Vol. 1, No. 5, 1934). On March 2, in the vicinity of West King, we steamed through a close-packed raft of birds which was estimated to cover a considerably greater area than the West King, that is, about 50 acres. They were packed so closely that they had difficulty in rising off the water and assuming only two birds to the square yard, a very conservative estimate, there would be upwards of half a million birds in that particular raft. At the same time, to the north of Princes Islands, there was visible another raft of similar size, bringing the estimated total of birds in the area to about one million. It is of interest that on the return journey to Auckland, which occupied about four days, not more than a couple of hundred birds of this species were noted and of these the majority were in the Hauraki Gulf.

Puffinus carneipes, Flesh-footed Shearwater.—Observed off-shore in about the usual numbers.

Pachyptila turtur, Fairy Prion.—Although not recorded from the Three Kings, it is, during the spring and summer months, not uncommon at sea in this area, and particularly round the North Cape, becoming progressively more plentiful as one approaches the breeding stations at Poor Knights, Bream Island, and Hen and Chickens, but on this trip of about 500 miles, not one was seen. Richdale (Whero, Island of Sea-birds) states "that this species (*titi-wainui*) begins to lay towards the end of October with the early chicks breaking the shell a few days before Christmas. During February all those chicks on any island take flight, and by March 1 not a *titi-wainui* is to be seen." My observations indicate that this also holds good for those colonies nesting on the northern islands. During this cruise very few schools of fish, normally plentiful in this stretch of water, were seen. There had been a prolonged spell of easterly weather during the summer, and possibly the fish, followed by the birds, had moved well out to sea; or perhaps the birds had moved away to their winter feeding range, the whereabouts of which is still a matter requiring further investigation.

***Diomedea* sp.**, Albatross.—About a dozen birds, all immature, were noted between North Cape and Three Kings.

***Thalassarche* sp.**, Mollymawk.—Twenty plus between North Cape and Three Kings; owing to weather conditions the species could not be determined.

Phoebastria palpebrata, Light-mantled Sooty Albatross.—A particularly fine specimen was seen about five miles east of Three Kings.

Phalacrocorax carbo, Black Shag.—One was seen flying the length of North-West Bay, fairly high up and close to the cliffs, apparently looking for a suitable resting place. (A new record for the group.)

Morus serrator, Gannet.—The South-West King colony was the only one which it was possible to inspect. This group has steadily increased in numbers during the last three years. In 1947 the nests were all in the open; in 1948 they had encroached about a chain into the short scrub

at the back; this year some nests were a chain or more further inland, under the puka trees, thus entailing a walk of a couple of chains before the birds would be able to take off: A successful breeding season was indicated by the fact that there appeared to be a young one for nearly all the nests. Three young were still in down, but all the rest were fully feathered and ready to fly. The other colonies, on the Princes Islands, appeared fully occupied and showed no appreciable change since last year, but owing to weather conditions no close examination was possible. Reference has been made in previous papers to an apparent retardation of nesting dates for many of the Three Kings birds: further evidence of this is afforded by a count of gannets during the voyage up from Auckland. In the Hauraki Gulf (Horu Horu colony) of 20 plus birds seen, five were birds of the year; in the vicinity of the Poor Knights, 30 plus birds, of which one was immature. In the Three Kings area, over a period of three days, many hundreds were observed on the wing, but all were adult.

Larus novae-hollandiae, Red-billed Gull.—The red-billed gulls had almost all left the nesting areas. On Great King the whole of the S.E. side was deserted; North-West Bay was deserted except for a few late stragglers in the Crater Head colony. On Stella Rock only two young were still on the nests. When not at sea, the birds were congregated for resting and roosting purposes on bare rocky faces, chiefly on the Princes Islands, at a lower level than the nesting areas.

Catharacta antarctica, Sea Hawk.—A sea hawk was observed in the passage between Great King and South-West King. It circled the yacht quite closely three times, and then flew off and attacked a mollymawk resting on the water. (A new record for the area.)

Porzana tabuensis, Spotless Crake.—On South-West King a young one still in down (probably a week to ten days old) was captured, and after examination released. This is another example of very late nesting: in my experience on the Poor Knights, for example, where the crake is particularly plentiful, laying appeared to have finished by the middle of December.

Pseudogerygone igata, Grey Warbler.—A grey warbler was seen at the old camp site near the depot on Great King. The grey warbler was recorded by Cheeseman on both Great King and S.W. King in 1888 and 1891, but was not recorded either by the Arbutus expeditions or the Internal Affairs goat-killing party. It seems almost impossible that if present it could have been missed by both these expeditions, which combed the island so thoroughly, one in the spring of 1945 and the other in the winter of 1946. The specimen observed would appear to be a straggler from the north coast of the mainland, where the species is common. It is to be hoped that it may prove to be the forerunner of a recolonisation movement due to more favourable conditions brought about by the rapid change in the vegetation since the destruction of the goat population in 1946. Many species of broad-leaved trees, for instance, karaka, puka, rangiora, various species of **Coprosma** and **Pittosporum**, etc., which were virtually non-existent, are now coming up in great profusion all over the island, many of the seedlings already being 4 to 6 feet in height.

Limosa lapponica, Bar-tailed Godwit.—On the afternoon of March 2 a flight of about 400 birds appeared, coming from the E.S.E.; they were flying in the typical V formation with a leader well out in front. They passed over the Great King at a height of about 1000 feet and disappeared in a north-westerly direction. Although the distance was too great for a positive identification, I have no doubt that this was a forerunner of the northern migration due soon to start from Parengarenga.

No further comment is called for concerning other species noted during this trip, which included: Red-fronted parrakeet, bellbird, kingfisher, pipit, harrier, blackbird, chaffinch and starling.