

VISIT TO LITTLE BARRIER.

By R. B. Sibson, Auckland.

At the end of 1947 a second visit was made to Little Barrier Island by members of the King's College Bird Club. The party, which contained three members of the O.S.N.Z., was comprised of J. K. A. Commons, J. C. Davenport, M. Draffin, M. C. Hanna, B. D. Heather, M. R. Houghton, G. F. Lamb, W. N. Tucker and the writer. We landed on the island in time for breakfast on December 29 and left eight days later at noon. Our stay was thus nearly a fortnight later than that of the 1946 party (v. N.Z. Bird Notes, Vol 2, No. 6).

A first impression on arrival was that there was much less song than during our visit in 1946. This impression was later confirmed as we moved about the south-west sector of the island. Three trips were made to the summit, the first by all members of the party; the second on New Year's Eve by Davenport, Houghton and Tucker; the last on January 2 by Hanna, Heather and Sibson. An interesting observation was that on the high ridges it was a poor year for the flowering of the yellow flax (*Phormium colensoi*). Consequently no "orange-fronted" bellbirds were seen.

Another marked contrast was in the number of petrels and shearwaters which could be seen daily off the south-west of the island. During our 1946 stay they were exceedingly abundant; during this visit, scarce, except for *Pt. cooki*.

In addition to the ground covered in 1946, Haowhenua, a gully running inland from the Pinnacles, was explored. The stream held some good specimens of native trout in its deeper pools. The bird life of Haowhenua was much the same as that of the other gullies, which we had got to know well.

Ornithologically, perhaps the most important events of the expedition were: (a) The finding and measuring of two eggs of the black petrel; (b) the discovery of a stitchbird's nest; (c) the proving that the rifleman, which some visiting ornithologists have not been able to find on the island, is a flourishing species there.

We are extremely grateful to the Government Tourist Department for permission to visit Little Barrier; to Mr. and Mrs. Terry, on whose ground we camped at Leigh and who proved good friends in numerous other ways; to Mr. H. Warren who successfully took us to and from the island in the "Gunner" with the minimum of discomfort; to Mr. E. G. Turbott, of the Auckland Museum, for advice on several matters readily given, and finally to Mr. and Mrs. Parkin, whose unfailing kindness and understanding contributed so much to the success and pleasure of our stay.

ITINERARY OF VISIT.

Dec. 29.—5 a.m., left Leigh. Wind, S.-W., light. Flat; Waipawa, Waikohare; Herekohu Pa at dusk.

Dec. 30.—Thumb Track; Summit.

Dec. 31.—Shag Track (duce Houghton) to Pisonias and beyond. Houghton, Davenport and Tucker to Summit for night.

Jan. 1.—Tirikakawa; Awaroa Point; Waikohare.

Jan. 2.—Grafton Gully; Waipawa; Parihakoako; Upper Waikohare. Hanna, Heather and Sibson to Summit for night.

Jan. 3.—Waipawa; Pinnacles; Haowhenua. Some rain.

Jan. 4.—Waikohare; Cow Gully, now East Paddock Gully; Waipawa. Drizzling.

Jan. 5.—Waikohare. Drizzling.

Jan. 6.—C.1.50. Left for Leigh. Corkscrew crossing. Strong variable winds.

Kiwi (*Apteryx australis*).—These must be plentiful. Every night they could be heard calling near the house and some would be foraging on the flat. A juvenile that was a partial albino was caught on January 3. On December 30 one was found hiding among burrows of *Pr. parkin-*

soni only 20 feet below the Summit. On January 2, at 8.11, two called on different sides of the main ridge near the Summit, below the tent, the one apparently answering the other.

Little Blue Penguin (*Eudyptula minor*).—Few were seen at sea. At dusk some usually set up their mournful wail. Few seemed to be coming ashore. One was found in the hay paddock on the evening on December 29. A young penguin was found in a burrow c. 70 feet up a slope near the west landing on January 2.

White-faced Storm Petrel (*Pelagodroma marina*).—Some scores were seen on both crossings. The remains of one (tarsus 40 mm.) were found at the Pinnacles, where black-backed gulls had evidently eaten it.

Flesh-footed Shearwater (*Puffinus carneipes*).—Only a few were seen on either crossing. Compared with last year they were scarce.

Buller's Shearwater (*P. bulleri*).—Only four seen on the way over. A few more on the way back.

Fluttering Shearwater (*P. gavia*).—Some hundreds on the way over. Few on the way back.

Parkinson's Petrel (*Procellaria parkinsoni*).—On 30/12/47 two were found in accessible burrows near the Summit, each sitting on an egg. As these eggs are very scarce in museums and verification of old measurements was needed, they were carefully measured before being replaced under the sitting birds. The measurements were, 71 x 52; and 70 x 52 mm. Both eggs had been laid quite recently, one in particular being a clean white, scarcely at all peat-stained.

On the evening of 31/12/47, Houghton, Davenport and Tucker, camping near the Summit, saw the first *parkinsoni* come in at 8.24 and the second at 8.31 p.m. Eleven came in during the first half-hour and 16 in three-quarters of an hour. It was misty and visibility was poor. On the evening of 2/1/48, Hanna, Heather and Sibson noted the first *parkinsoni* at the Summit at 8.14. There was a strong easterly gale and although there was no moon, visibility was good. Earlier in the evening two black petrels had been found in straight burrows. One could be reached and had no egg. Some birds as they came in circled the Summit as many as six times at a very great speed in the high wind. No sound was heard from birds on the wing. After dark fell the "clack-clack" call was heard from only one burrow. Wing measurements of three sitting birds were 352, 345, 340 m.m. None was seen at sea.

Cook's Petrel (*Pterodroma cookii*).—On both crossings they were easily the commonest petrel at sea, and every day some were visible half a mile or so off-shore from the island. It would appear that during the breeding season Little Barrier has a ring of Cook's petrels around it by day, a ring of several miles thickness, for odd ones were seen within three miles or so of Leigh.

First calls were noted each evening:—December 29, 8.9; Dec. 30, 8.10; Dec. 31, 8.11; Jan. 1, 8.13; Jan. 2, 8.13 (8.15 at Summit); Jan. 3, 8.5, overcast and dark early, many by 8.10; Jan. 4, 8.3, windy, cloudy and rainy, many by 8.10; Jan. 5, 8.7.

Remains of about thirty birds, some of them very ancient skeletons, were cleared from Thumb and Summit tracks. There are very few remnants on the highest ridges. Average wing measurements of 23 birds was 238 m.m. (max. 245, min. 228). A female containing remains of an egg measured 238 in the wing. Houghton thought that the noise at the Summit fell away about midnight but was resumed later as the birds became excited at leaving. Cook's petrel has many distinct calls. Perhaps the most frequently used are the quick "whi-kek-kek" and the goat-like bleating (v. last year's report). There are also a slow, deliberate "kek-kek-kek," and a less seldom heard "hwit-wit." Last year's puzzling "borrr" definitely comes from *cooki*; and there is also a cat-like "purrrrr."

On January 1 a freshly-killed specimen was found on the track, was preserved and sent to the Auckland Museum. Mr. P. C. Bull examined

the stomach and reported: Sex, male; testes, small and black, scarcely those of a breeding bird, right 3.5 x 2.5 mm., left 4.5 x 3 mm. Gullet, empty; gizzard, numerous cephalopod beaks and small rounded yellowish stones; intestine, contents digested beyond recognition.

Pied Shag (*Phalacrocorax varius*).—These were commonly seen along the coast or flying over the flat. No nests seemed to be occupied by young birds, which were all fledged and flying.

Gannet (*Morus serrator*).—Some could be seen every day off the south coast; seldom more than ten at once.

White-fronted Tern (*Sterna striata*).—A few were fishing off Titoki Point as we arrived. Scarce on both crossings.

Black-backed Gull (*Larus dominicanus*).—No young could be seen at the Pinnacles, where three pairs had nested. A deserted nest along the beach had two eggs.

Red-billed Gull (*L. novaehollandiae*).—Two on the boulder bank when we arrived. Occasional visitors.

Pigeon (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*).—There was no flock on the flat as last year, but pairs were scattered through the bush. On 2/1/48 Houghton found a nest in a tree-fern up Waipawa. It contained a squab.

Harrier (*Circus approximans*).—Just before dusk, as we were crouching out of the wind waiting for the first petrels, the only one seen flew over the Summit a few feet over our heads.

Morepork (*Ninox novaeseelandiae*).—Widely distributed. On 4/1/48 a nest containing one youngster was found in an old tree up Cow-Boatshed Gully. Both adults sat in full view a few yards away, watching Davenport as he climbed to the nest. As he started to climb a soft "hoo" was heard and one bird flew and perched near the tree, where it could watch. Then the other appeared and sat in a tree-fern, also intently watching. Further down the gully a deserted egg was found in a hole.

Kaka (*Nestor meridionalis*).—These were not as much in evidence as last year, when it was impossible not to notice their noisy evening flights. But they were well distributed over the island, and odd birds and pairs were sometimes seen on or high over the flat. On 4/1/48 six were seen flying together.

Red-fronted Parrakeet (*Cyanoramphus novaeseelandiae*).—These were common and seemed to be at home on all parts of the island that we visited. Many young were on the wing. No nests were found.

Shining Cuckoo (*Chalcites lucidus*).—What was probably the same bird was heard every day near the house from the time of our arrival at 7.30 a.m. on 29/12/47 to January 6, when we left. On January 4 it was singing most persistently. None was heard elsewhere on the island.

Long-tailed Cuckoo (*Eudynamis taitensis*).—Seldom seen; often heard, especially on the ridges

Kingfisher (*Halcyon sanctus*).—Though these birds are not conspicuous, two nests were found. (a) In a pohutukawa overhanging the boulders below Parihakoakoa. It contained an egg and a naked youngster. (b) In a pohutukawa well into the bush on the Waikohare side of the Thumb Track and visible from the track. Ten feet below in another hole was a stitchbird's nest! The kingfisher was feeding young, on lizards when it could catch them, breaking them in pieces on a branch.

Rifleman (*Acanthisitta chloris*).—Compared with the scarcity of them last year, they were remarkably ubiquitous. We noted them in the following gullies: Waikohare, often; Tirikakawa, Waipawa, Boatshed; and on Thumb, Summit and Shag tracks. Three were the most seen together.

Grey Warbler (*Pseudogerygone igata*).—For the first week of our stay these were silent and elusive. Very few were seen, though a care-

ful watch was kept for them.. Two with two riflemen on Thumb Track, c. 1000 feet, were the highest seen. On 5/1/48 their singing suddenly became obvious—there was a light drizzle much of the day—and again on January 6, I heard at least three singing on the lower kanuka slopes.

White-breasted Tit (*Petroica macrocephala toitoi*).—Ubiquitous from the garden, where one was often singing, to the Summit. Males were much more often seen than females or juveniles. No nests were found.

Robin (*Miro australis*).—Single birds were seen in several gullies; e.g., Tirikakawa, 1 male and 1 female or juvenile; Grafton, Waipawa, ? juvenile male, singing a soft limpid song; Haowhenua, 1 male; Cow or Boatshed, 1 female or juvenile. None could be found in Waikohare, though we spent much time there; nor were robins in evidence on the ridge tracks. On 31/12/47 I watched one hopping about on the sun-baked clay of Shag Track. The bird seemed to be finding insects in the dry and dying moss on the track.

Fantail (*Rhipidura fuliginosa*).—Present in all types of country from flat to Summit.

Whitehead (*Mohoua ochrocephala albigilla*).—I still think this the commonest bird on the island. Small parties were everywhere. To study their many notes and calls would be a full-time task in itself.

Silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis*).—Remarkably scarce. They were seen, four being the most together, only about the garden and orchard. Competition with the larger honey-eaters may be too much for them.

Tui (*Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae*).—We were a week later than last year. The pohutukawa far back in the bush were in flower, so that there was not the concentration of tuis in the coastal zone. I saw very few tuis actually feeding on pohutukawa. There was scarcely any song from the birds on the flat, but markedly more from those in the high country. Young birds were on the wing. No occupied nests were found.

Bell Bird (*Anthornis melanura*).—Very little song was heard. Two nests in the garden each contained three young when we arrived; one in a grape vine, one in the hedge. The young in the grape vine nest by the back door were being fed largely on insects. They left the nest about January 3. Bell birds were all over the island, from the under-cliffs to the highest ridges.

Stitchbird (*Notiomystis cincta*).—Cocks, with their gay, conspicuous plumage, were noted frequently: December 29, Waikohare; Dec. 30, two on the Thumb Track, one below the steep boulder slope, the other on the ridge just below the Thumb; two on the Summit Track below the junction with a large interval between them; January 2, two, one being in worn plumage, in the vicinity of Parihakoakoa, 1 in upper Waikohare; 1 at the steep section over slippery boulders on the Summit Track. Females and young on the wing were more elusive than last year. High on the Thumb Track I thought I glimpsed three juveniles together travelling through the tree tops, and at 6.20 a.m. on January 3 an inquisitive female inspected us as we struck camp on the Summit Ridge.

Perhaps the greatest excitement of the trip was reserved till near the end. On January 4, Hanna and Heather found an occupied stitchbird's nest; the first nest, we believe, found for more than a quarter of a century. The stitchbirds had taken over an abandoned kingfisher's hole, 8ft. 6in. from the ground, in the rotten seam of a great pohutukawa which was growing a chain off the Thumb Track near the top of the slope of Waikohare and about 200 feet above sea level. An added interest was a kingfisher's nest, still in use, in another hole ten feet higher up the same tree. A kingfisher was seen to bring a lizard and to break it into small pieces before feeding it to its young..

The stitchbird's nest contained four well-feathered young, showing yellow at the gape. Near the nest the adults were most unobtrusive, the male scarcely appearing at all. The feeding seemed to be done entirely

by the female, who, as she approached the nest, besides the typical "tzit" also uttered sometimes a soft "whit." When I saw her approach no food was visible in her beak; elsewhere it has been mentioned that young bellbirds receive a liberal diet of insects; Guthrie Smith had already noted that young stitchbirds seemed to be fed on nectar. Once after entering the hole she remained inside for two hours. On another occasion Houghton timed her nectar-collecting round, if that is what it was, as 11 minutes.

Watching the stitchbird's nest took up much of our time during the last two days. Fairly persistent drizzle and a poor light made photography difficult. However, Heather succeeded in getting one quite good picture of the female stitchbird on the pohutukawa trunk just above the nesting hole, a sight we are not likely to forget for many a long day.

INTRODUCED BIRDS.

Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*).—On my first walk round the garden and flat, I counted ten singing males. This excluded the east paddock, where there were probably 4/5 pairs. A chaffinch was singing near Awaroa Point along the undercliff. There was still plenty of vigorous song when we left.

Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*).—There seemed to me an increase over last year. They are numerous on the boulder bank.

Thrush (*Turdus ericetorum*).—Faint snatches of song were heard on December 31 and January 4. A nest placed on a clump of *Astelia* on a kanuka in Waikohare had newly-hatched young on December 29. Away from the flat, a thrush was seen along the undercliff towards Hao-whenua.

Blackbird (*T. merula*).—Young left a nest in the garden on January 6; and a nest in a tree-fern well into the bush near the matai and Maori pits off the Thumb Track contained a single well-feathered youngster on January 5. At least four males were heard singing, (a) garden, (b) Waikohare, (c) inland cliffs, (d) Shag Track. Near the garden a blackbird sang finely most of the morning of December 31 and even at noon when it was very hot. There was a marked decrease in singing during the ensuing days, but I heard two blackbirds singing in the evening of January 4. None was heard on January 5 and 6.

Hedge Sparrow (*Prunella modularis*).—There was plenty of full song, particularly noticeable during the drizzle of January 4 and 5. Dunnocks were noted at (a) Cow Gully, (b) orchard and garden, (2) 200 yards up Waikohare, (d) near Titoki Point, (e) inland cliffs in Grafton Gully, (f) mouth of Waipawa. Five-six pairs is a conservative estimate for the population of the flat.

Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*).—A flock of c. 200 was frequenting the flat; their chatter recalling hay meadows. Parties were sometimes noted flying along the cliffs.

Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*).—One was seen on December 29. No song heard.

FOOD OF HARRIER.—In the late afternoon at Waimumu, on November 24, 1947, I watched a harrier (*Circus approximans*) hunting along a gorse hedge. It circled a number of times around a gorse bush separated from the hedge, and after two or three attempts to catch something, was successful. It tore its victim to pieces and ate it, and on visiting the site of its kill, the few feathers that remained revealed its catch to have been a young blackbird (*Turdus merula*).—Mrs. I. Tily, Dunedin.