

WINTER NOTES ON NEW ZEALAND BIRDS.

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During the months of May and June, 1949, while on furlough from Malaya, I have had some opportunities of observing New Zealand birds. Neither the weather nor the season particularly favoured field ornithology, but in the course of short visits to the North Island Lake district, the coast of Bay of Plenty and Poverty Bay, Picton and Christchurch, my wife and I have had many hours of enjoyment and considerable good luck in our bird watchings. Some extracts from my notes may be worth recording as confirmation, or possibly in some cases slight extension of the observations of resident ornithologists.

Dabchick (*Polioccephalus rufopectus*).—This species seems quite common on lakes in the central plateau. From May 9 to 19, I have a daily record of seven birds in Otaramarae Bay, Lake Rotoiti. On May 15 we saw six birds together near the south shore of Lake Rotoiti, in the evening; during the day pairs had been noted on Lake Rotoehu and Rotoma. On May 19, a single bird on Lake Okareka, and three on Lake Tarawera near the landing stage; and on May 20, four birds near Sulphur Point, Lake Rotorua.

Giant Petrel or Nelly (*Macronectes giganteus*).—From the time when the launch entered Tory Channel from Queen Charlotte Sound until it reached the whaling station at Te Awaite, ("Tar White"), 40 or 50 nellies were seen flying low over the water, or sometimes rising and circling at a fair height above the sound. At the whaling station itself were something over 200 nellies feeding on the paunches and other refuse cast into the sea after the whales had been dealt with on the station. In the air, nellies are fine big petrels, and their gliding, purposeful flight is a pleasure to watch; but when a large number are collected and feeding on whale refuse, neither their habit nor their behaviour is calculated to arouse admiration. They are greedy feeders, repulsive in their eager guzzling and constant squabbling, and singularly unattractive when, temporarily sated, they sit with wings spread like a shag and bills blooded by the feast, on their floating food supply.

For some days previous to my visit to the station there had been a considerable amount of wind and rain, and I was told that during this period there was a very much larger concentration of nellies. On June 27, when we arrived at the whaling station about 11 a.m., there was an enormous collection of black-backed gulls, a smaller number of red-billed gulls, a flock of Cape pigeons, and, as stated, some 200 nellies, plus those further up the channel. By 4 p.m. there were no nellies on the station, none to be seen over the channel south of the station, and from the hill-top I could see only a few individuals near the mouth of the channel, where it joins Cook Strait.

Cape Pigeon (*Daption capensis*).—When we reached the whaling station at 11 a.m. on June 27, the flock numbered 100 birds. During the early afternoon all the Cape pigeons left the area. I was told that during the wilder weather of previous days the concentration had been much larger, at times up to 800 birds. I did not see the Cape pigeons make any attempt to feed on flesh or solid whale refuse. While I had them under observation they remained as a flock, sitting on the oily, bloodstained water, moving a little only when disturbed by the scramble of nellies or black-backed gulls.

Mutton Bird (*Puffinus griseus*).—On June 8 a stranded specimen was found on the shell bank at Miranda, Firth of Thames. It was reasonably fresh, plumage being still complete, and the only sign of decay being a few maggots under one wing. This would appear to be a fairly late record for New Zealand coasts. Identification was carefully checked.

Little Black Shag (*Phalacrocorax sulcirostris*).—On June 16, at Matata Lagoon, Bay of Plenty, my wife and I watched at very close range a party of seven little black shags. They sat in a row, first on a

footbridge and later on a row of stakes, along with two little pied shags, four adult white-throated shags and one young white-throated shag—an excellent opportunity for comparing field characteristics.

White Heron (*Casmerodius albus*).—We did not even know of the existence of Matata Lagoon Sanctuary until, driving along the coast road between Whakatane and Te Puke, on June 16, we spotted a white heron on the far side of the lagoon. This was the beginning of a three-hour spell of extremely interesting bird-watching.

The plumage of the heron was pure white, with yellow bill and black feet. Seen at long range through binoculars as it stood in a patch of shade, it looked a very pale grey, but this was only an illusion, and as soon as it moved into a patch of sunlight, the dazzling white plumage was again conspicuous. The bird was rather shy. I worked round the seaward side of the lagoon and watched it for a short time through the bushes at close range, but it soon became suspicious, and after stretching its neck and eyeing me with disapproval for a few minutes it took wing and flew slowly across to the western end of the lagoon. A Caspian tern which was in the air at the time, took exception to the heron's presence and made a number of dives at the larger bird as it flew. The heron flapped vigorously, turning in the air to make upward strikes with its bill in the direction of the tern; when the heron landed on the edge of the lagoon, the tern continued to dive, but the heron, from a crouch, jabbed its bill upwards in so menacing a manner that the tern decided to give it up, and after a short spell of standing near the heron, swearing, flew away. There was another Caspian tern on the lagoon which did not take part in the attack on the heron, but which later on joined the first tern in mobbing a passing harrier.

The heron spent most of its time in the shallow water, sometimes wading to the depth of its tarsal joint; it was a little restive and changed ground several times. I noticed that the ducks (large numbers of grey, a few shoveller and an odd mallard) seemed rather unhappy when the heron flew over them, and tended to swim outwards or to fly a little way and settle again; and a flock of stilts rose too as the heron's shadow fell across them, but soon landed again.

Bittern (*Botaurus poiciloptilus*).—In May, a number of bittern were seen in the lakeside swamps around Lake Rototi and elsewhere, and the behaviour of one bird at Lake Rotoma may be worth recording. It was spotted in the raupo on the water's edge at the narrow end of the lake, sitting in the normal hunched position. We stopped the car, and as we watched the bittern "froze" into the regulation posture, bill pointing upwards. My daughter left the road and approached the bird to watch it at closer range, and as she did so it rose and flew across the narrow arm of the lake to perch on a branch of teatree about 20 feet up. Here it remained for twenty minutes, watching us across the water. It must have been feeling rather uncomfortable, for it adopted every possible attitude, from a normal crouching perch to an upright posture with neck fully extended and bill horizontal; and sometimes it bunched its body, neck, head and bill pointing upwards, as it had done in the first place when disturbed in the raupo. Elsewhere I have seen bittern perch for a moment or two on a low bush, but had not seen one use a tree perch for so long a period, nor at such a height above water level.

Paradise Duck (*Tadorna variegata*).—On June 12 a pair flew across Lake Waikaremoana, landed, and spent some time cropping the grass on the lakeside flats. After a while they rose again and flew in a wide sweep along the hillside before again settling near the mouth of the Aniwanuiwa Stream.

New Zealand Scaup or Black Teal (*Aythya novaeseelandiae*).—At Otaramarae Bay, Lake Rototi, black teal were seen daily from May 12 to 20, numbers varying from 22 on the 12th to 168 in one flock on the 14th. On the 15th there were over 100 in Otaramarae Bay and another flock of 94 in Huaparū Bay on the south shore of the lake. From then

until the 20th, the Otaramarae birds were still present daily, but broke up into smaller parties.

Other records are: May 17, Lake Okataina, near the Lake House, 22 and 12; May 19, a solitary bird on Lake Tarawera and 13 on Lake Okareka; June 10, 4 black teal along with, but apart from, a flock of 65 grey duck, near Lake House at Lake Waikaremoana; and June 16, Matata Lagoon, Bay of Plenty, a drake and two duck.

Bush Wren (*Xenicus longipes*).—Waikareiti Track, June 13, was one of our most interesting excursions, in spite of (or perhaps because of) the high winds and showery weather, which at 2,900 feet on the shores of Lake Waikareiti, turned for a time into hail and a little snow. At an altitude of about 2,800 feet above sea level, in the dripping forest alongside the track, our attention was caught by a small bird working on the bole of a large tree; later it, and another, came down to some low bushes on the edge of the path, and for a short period my wife and I watched them at close range and from different angles. Our combined notes leave no doubt as to the identification, and this has been checked by reference to skins in Canterbury Museum. The comparatively long, straight bill was noticeable, as was the white line over the eye, whitish throat, warm brown colour on the top of the head and hind neck, and the grey breast. The bird was considerably bigger than a rifleman, with which I am acquainted, having observed the species at Te Whaiti.

Pipit (*Anthus novaeseelandiae*).—About ten miles from Taupo, on the South Road, there is a corner on the hillside with a good view down a valley and over part of the lake. On May 22 we stopped the car at this point, as probably many other travellers have done. I was standing on the side of the road looking down the valley when I noticed a pipit running under the car. It paid no heed as I approached, and was shortly joined by a second pipit, which came up the bank, within a few feet of the other side of the car, and uttered a few rather loud cheeps. These two birds must be well used to the habits of travellers; they did everything except sit up and beg. They took a few crumbs which we threw to them, but would not eat grated coconut, though one of them picked up a piece and held it in its bill for a while before discarding it. When we moved on, all they did was to move out of the way with a flirt of wings and tail, and land again on the edge of the fern beyond the grass verge. The pipit is everywhere a familiar, friendly little bird, but it must, I think, be unusual to find a pair which have so completely accepted the presence and potential usefulness of humankind.

North Island Robin (*Miro australis*).—The bush near Lake Okataina, on both sides of the approach road, is full of bell birds and tuis, fantails, white eyes, some pied tits, and numbers of exotic finches; I was sitting on a log when a single robin came up through the scrub from behind me, attracted my attention by a clear single note, and remained for a few minutes at close range before moving off into the thicket (May 17).

White-eye (*Zosterops lateralis*).—I have been greatly struck by the abundance of white-eyes, in every sort of situation from gardens, coastal scrub, fernland and farm to the bush and the hills. My impression has been that in the more cultivated areas the flocks may be smaller, and in the forested areas larger; this may be a sign of the season. In forest clearings near Lake Okataina, May flocks were associating with goldfinches and chaffinches; in the Waikaremoana bush, June flocks of 30 to 50 white-eyes were frequently accompanied by much smaller parties of whiteheads, sometimes with a pair or two of fantails in attendance.

Insects and small fruit seem to be taken quite impartially, depending upon what is conveniently available, and flocks which have been sweeping the leaves and twigs in their passage will pause to eat some berries before passing on in their hunt for insects. In the forest around Picton reservoirs, where white-eyes were exceedingly numerous in June, flocks were seen not only in low trees, bushes and scrub, but often in tall trees,

sometimes in company with chaffinches. We watched one party of white-eyes which were working on the boles of trees, flicking off flakes of dry bark with their bills and searching the crevices for insects.

Bellbird (*Anthornis melanura*).—I have no yardstick by which to measure the increase or decrease of native birds, but have been delighted to see how well the tui, bellbird, and native pigeon are holding their own in such suitable areas as I have been able to visit. Tuks are familiar birds in Titirangi, within a few miles of the centre of Auckland city, and I watched them on the gum trees on the waterfront at Picton; but in the high lands in the centre of the North Island, my impression is that tuks, though numerous, give place to bellbirds as the commoner species. It has not been my fortune as yet to hear the spring song of the bellbirds, but in these two months I have been charmed by their profusion, and such song as the season will allow, in the bush areas around the lakes; and their presence, in the harer parts of the central plateau, wherever a few trees, a hedge or a patch of scrub will give them a living. At this season of the year, although tuks may be seen on low trees or bushes on the forest edge, in the more heavily tree-clad areas they seem to keep mainly to the tree tops. One hears them, but they are often hidden among the leaves, and it is not usually until they fly that one may enjoy the brilliant sheen of their sunlit plumage; but the bellbird frequents lower trees, bushes, and more open country, and is therefore much more conspicuous; it is not at all shy, and at the eastern end of Lake Rotoma three of us stood within a few feet of a berry bush in which six bellbirds were busy feeding, singing, coughing and chiding.

INTRODUCED BIRDS.

I have noted hedge sparrows (*Prunella modularis*) in various fairly open localities, farm land, etc., and was interested to see a bird in the closer country near Lake House, Waikaremoana, and a pair moving about among the brushwood in a small forest clearing near Lake Okataina, frequented also by goldfinches and chaffinches.

Yellow Hammers (*Emberiza citrinella*) are common enough in most settled districts which I have visited, particularly so in winter flocks in Poverty Bay and Bay of Plenty. Quite a number were seen (not flocked) during the second week in June, on the roadside in the more open patches of bush around Lake Waikaremoana.

In the hill bush on the track between Lake Waikaremoana and Lake Waikareiti, on June 13, a day of high wind and rain, with some hail and snow on the higher lake, I was interested to watch what appeared to be a mass movement of greenfinches (*Chloris chloris*) with a few chaffinches. The birds were seen at an elevation of about 2700 feet above sea level, and the general direction of movement was from the small to the larger lake (that is, roughly south). There were a number of flocks, one flock which I attempted to count being well over 100 birds. For the most part they moved through the tree tops, and seemed to be searching the leaves and twigs to some extent during their hurried passage; a few smaller parties were encountered on the low bushes and on the track itself, but did not linger, and the whole vast assemblage of birds appeared to be moving on a definite line.

At Picton, in the valley which leads to the forest area around the reservoirs, exotic finches were present in very large numbers in late June. In the rough open country there were large flocks of chaffinches, and almost equally large flocks of goldfinches (one party, bathing in a clear stream in the afternoon sunlight, reminded me yet again of that most appropriate term, a charm of goldfinches); smaller flocks of greenfinches and yellow hammers, parties of redpolls; and in the forest, flocks of chaffinches, and smaller numbers of goldfinches and redpolls. This great profusion of exotic species is unfortunately balanced, in the forest, by a paucity of native species. Pigeon are not uncommon, black and pied fantails, grey warblers, and a few yellow-breasted tits were seen, but the only species found in really considerable numbers was the white-eye

—in two days spent in the area we were hardly out of sight of a white-eye at any time.

With the exception of the very interesting record of the occurrence of bush wren near Lake Waikareiti, there is little of importance in these extracts from my notes; but I have been glad to put them on record, for what they are worth, in gratitude for many pleasant hours spent in bird-watching, and many kind people who have helped me. Their offers of further help when I can visit New Zealand again at a more kindly season, have given me great encouragement and good cause for pleasant anticipation. The way of the bird-watcher in New Zealand is hard; he has to look for his birds (except the common and the introduced species) with a patience and a tenacity not called for elsewhere; but the result is worth the effort.

DISPLAY OF THE HARRIER (*Circus approximans*).—A congregation of about one hundred harriers was observed by D. Brathwaite, Peter C. Bull and the writer on June 23, 1949, at 14.30 p.m. about half a mile east from the Tikokino-Kereru Road (Hawke's Bay). The birds were hovering at about twice the normal flying altitude of harriers over pastoral land adjoining the Gwavas State Forest. Harriers' calls were frequently heard. This congregation was spread over a hundred acres, and the largest width of the area was about one mile. After about 20 to 30 minutes the majority of the birds dispersed while the remainder were hovering as before. Other work prevented us from continuing our observations but about half an hour later seventy harriers were counted hovering over the same area. A few of the birds lowered themselves down, while others dispersed. It should be added that the writer, travelling through the same area at dawn on the same morning counted six harriers flying towards the place of the congregation. It would be of interest to know whether similar displays of the harrier were observed at this time of the year by other members of our society.—(Kazimierz Wodzicki, Wellington.)

YOUNG BELLBIRDS AND TUIS.—*It was mid-January and both tuis (*Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae*) and bell birds (*Anthornis melanura*) were numerous around our tent. To encourage the youngsters we made an improvised bird table. Tins of diluted condensed milk and soaked figs were conveniently attached to nearby twigs and branches. A young tui took possession of one tin and milk, and never seemed to leave it. It remained there day after day, sipping the contents every few minutes or when it was so full that not a single drop more could be taken it sat close to the tin and only moved to chase off any other bird that ventured near. On the other hand, three young bellbirds preferred the figs and ate them every day. They were astonishingly tame and would allow me to caress them lightly with a finger as they fed. Now and then their mother would appear and immediately the youngsters saw her they yelled lustily for food. She at once attacked the nearest fig and pulling off pieces popped them into the wide-open mouths around her. But what misplaced energy, for the moment she went the youngsters continued to calmly help themselves.—S. D. Potter, Auckland.*

POSE OF THE BITTERN.—Many people know the protective pose of the bittern (*Botaurus poiciloptilus*) and the majority of illustrations show it in an upright position with upraised bill, but it was on February 8 that I was shown that this is not always the pose adopted and that surroundings may make a difference. I was making my way along a swamp edge where most of the vegetation was short and in any case somewhat sparse. Rounding a sloping piece of country I suddenly confronted a bittern not more than five yards from me. Slowly the bird settled down to a crouching position but with its bill gradually moving upwards. For three or four minutes I watched and realised how very much more obvious the bird would have been had it stood upright. No movement was made until I moved away, when it turned its head slightly to follow my departure.—S. D. Potter, Auckland.