

BIRD LIFE AT WAIRUNA, SOUTH OTAGO.

(Compiled from reports received from Mr. H. Taylor, corresponding member of Dunedin Naturalists' Field Club; June, 1948—June, 1949.)

The country at Wairuna is gentle, undulating farm land, on the south side of which is a multiple range of hills rising from about 400 feet to 1,600 feet, and lying approximately east and west. These hills are in an almost natural tussocky state with plenty of scrubby coprosma, while in suitable places are several small patches of bush, increasing in size from tiny pieces of a scrubby nature in the west, to a few acres of good mixed bush, of perhaps 20 acres each, towards Clinton. Beyond the hills is the Clinton Gorge and district of Kaiwera. The nearest bush to the homestead is about a mile away.

In August, 1948, four Canada geese (*Branta canadensis*) were seen in an open paddock, and on December 24, again four—presumably the same birds—were seen in another paddock a mile or so from where they were present in August. They took to flight, disappearing over a low ridge in a west-north-west direction.

Grey ducks (*Anas poicilorhyncha*) frequent one or two water holes in the district, and one or two are known to nest in secluded scrub-covered creeks in the hills.

About 30 years ago a bittern (*Botaurus poiciloptilus*) was found dead on the hills by my father, and about 16 years ago we saw a live one a quarter of a mile or so from the homestead. These are our only records of this bird on the farm, and we do not know from what habitat these two had come.

Harriers (*Circus approximans*) are quite numerous, but, of course, are few in comparison with the gulls. They raid the nests of other birds, for I have seen one or two hover around the garden and then watched one dive in among the branches of the trees. Almost every season we come across at least one or more of their nests in swampy gullies. Hawks do not seem to attack farm stock. They help to get rid of rabbits living and dead, for they patrol the main highway and railway for rabbits and other small creatures killed on the traffic way.

Pukeko (*Porphyrio poliocephalus*) occur in a swampy area about a mile or so away. Odd ones occasionally stray nearer the homestead. Once when we had an oat stack, one lived near it for weeks.

I have not noted the banded dotterel (*Charadrius bicinctus*) but my father has seen some about in recent years.

Occasionally pied stilts (*Himantopus himantopus*) are seen on the farm. A pair was present at the beginning of August, 1948. Often a few are about a neighbour's farm a mile away. They seem to like wet cultivated land. On the way to Gore, about a mile before reaching Arthurton siding, we usually see a few about on a wet grassy flat.

An odd black-fronted tern (*Chlidonias albigularis*) is liable to be seen at any time, but may not be noted for weeks or months on end. It keeps close behind the plough, landing for an instant to snatch a worm, and then off again.

Black-backed gulls (*Larus dominicanus*) are about at all seasons. They sometimes attack lambs or cast sheep, but I think there are only certain individual criminals. On the Wairuna Peak, at a height of 1,400 to 1,500 feet, there is a colony of these gulls. The present owner of the land does not discourage them. He maintains that the birds keep the locality well manured (which is quite evident from the fact that the bright green patch stands out clearly on the slope), but he does not realise, however, that much of that green is formed at the expense of both his and his neighbours' sheep's eyes and new-born lambs. There

must be a heavy toll on these for some distance from such a colony. I have not visited the nesting site, but the birds can be seen circling, and their screeching heard for a half a mile or more away. The owner said that in the nesting season it is almost impossible to walk through the colony without treading on nests or eggs. He also said that at one time cattle were turned on to the hills to winter, and when they found the lush grass at the gull colony they stayed in that same small locality all the winter. In spite of the gulls' great value as soil fertilisers on poor ground it seems an expensive form of fertilising, and I do not think it wise to foster these birds in a sheep-farming district.

Black-billed gulls (*Larus bulleri*) come here only at ploughing time and then in comparatively small numbers.

One or two pigeons (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*) are sometimes seen in the larger bush areas in the hills, but only rarely come near the homestead. On July 25, 1948, in a friend's garden near Kaiwera, in the Clinton Gorge, a wood pigeon was found to have taken up its residence. The owners of the garden consoled themselves with the thought that the bird compensated for the amount of fruit-blossom eaten by helping to keep broom in check by feeding on its flowers and buds.

The little grey owl (*Athene noctua*) is occasionally seen, but more often heard.

Riflemen (*Acanthisitta chloris*) and grey warblers (*Pseudogerygone igata*) are seen in small numbers. The yellow-breasted tit (*Petroica macrocephala macrocephala*) is noted in the bush but seldom comes to the garden.

Silver-eyes (*Zosterops lateralis*) which arrived in numbers about the beginning of May, 1949, by the beginning of June had dwindled greatly in numbers, possibly only temporarily. Perhaps the abundance of food in the bush this year has kept them well supplied. Besides taking the honeyed water provided for them, they help themselves to the milk in the dogs' dish on the lawn.

A pair of pied fantails (*Rhipidura fuliginosa*) and a pair of bellbirds (*Anthornis melanura*) have been seen about the garden for some time, and were still present in June, 1949. Bellbirds also help themselves to the milk in the dish on the lawn. Both these species of birds appear friendly and inquisitive. There are odd black fantails in the bush, and recently one was seen in a neighbour's garden.

The tui (*Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae*) and the shining cuckoo (*Chalcites lucidus*) are two birds which so far have remained unrecorded in the vicinity of the homestead.

Introduced birds such as the blackbird (*Turdus merula*), the song-thrush (*T. ericetorum*) and the sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) are all too common.

Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) are common. They probably do a good deal of good as, for instance, in ridding sheep of ticks, but are unwelcome, untidy tenants about farm buildings. A friend on the north side of Clinton says that at dusk starlings fly in to a large plantation in tremendous numbers.

Small flocks of goldfinches (*Carduelis carduelis*) and yellowhammers (*Emberiza citrinella*) rove here and there. I have seen these birds on the hills and noted the yellowhammers at 1600 feet. We sometimes see their sturdy relative the greenfinch (*Chloris chloris*) in the garden.

Redpolls (*Carduelis cabaret*) and chaffinches (*Fringilla coelebs*) are also noted in the district.

Hedge sparrows (*Prunella modularis*) are sometimes seen, and skylarks (*Alauda arvensis*) are common. The latter do not appear to be decreasing here, as has been reported from country district elsewhere.