

OBSERVATIONS ON THE SONG OF THE NORTH ISLAND SADDLEBACK

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METHODS

Since sound recordings can be of great assistance in the study of the Saddleback, a tape recorder with portable power supply and parabola was taken to Hen Island on the August-September visit. This recorder was heavy so some mobility was sacrificed but even so recordings of notes from different birds were made within a half-mile radius of the base camp.

For the visit during January 1964, a transistorized recorder was used, giving complete mobility and further opportunities for recording and attracting the birds. Territorial birds, such as the Saddleback, respond readily to playback of certain calls, and this fact can be of great assistance in the close study of the species.

As a result of these two visits a representative selection of the various types of call of the Saddleback is now available as tape recordings for further analysis.

TYPES OF CALL

A tentative classification of the more usual calls may be associated with various activities of the birds.

Territorial Call

The Saddleback uses this challenging and penetrating call in making known its territory to neighbouring birds. Andersen (1926) gives a good phonetic representation by describing the notes as "Chee-per-per Chee-per-per" repeated a number of times with accent on the first syllable. However it was noted that this section was often, though not always preceded by a note which can be described as "Chink." The call from the female is lower in pitch and less incisive in those examples studied.

N. J. Ledgard recorded that when a pigeon flew low overhead, a male bird stopped feeding, gave its territorial call and then resumed feeding. It has been noted that the note is often given from the ground, and this territorial call appears to be the type heard most frequently from the birds throughout the year.

Alarm Call

This sound is produced as a series of quick agitated notes, similar in form to the alarm cry of the Bellbird or Blackbird. Recordings of the alarm call were made while the birds were vigorously reacting to the presence of Moreporks during August-September 1963 and January 1964. In a recording where all three birds are harassing a Morepork the notes of the Saddleback may be easily distinguished by the higher pitch and more incisive quality.

Courtship, Feeding and Communicating Calls

Many observations of courtship display by the male were noted during the first visit in August-September — that is, the period preceding their breeding season. These included feeding of the female, and caressing actions with display of wings and tail, often accompanied by low amplitude calls of soft and organ-like quality. When tapes containing these calls are played, the birds show a strong reaction and

approach within a few feet of the observer. These calls appear to be more in evidence in the spring than in January when the breeding season has concluded.

A variety of soft "whistles" and "pips" is often given when a pair is feeding some distance apart, apparently as a means of maintaining contact. A resemblance between these notes and those of another wattle bird — the Kokako — is apparent.

Flute Calls

The low amplitude notes mentioned above have great beauty but the loud melodious flute calls are more easily heard and probably constitute the usual "song" of the Saddleback given more or less at any time throughout the year. Although these notes have not yet been associated with a particular type of activity, more were heard in January than in the August-September period.

DISCUSSION

By playing back the various types of call it was found that the agitated notes produced during harrying of Moreporks were the most reliable in attracting Saddlebacks from some distance. The territorial call was also found useful for attraction in spring.

The Saddleback must surely be one of our most interesting species to study for quality and variety of call notes. The sharply penetrating and energetic territorial call leaves one in no doubt as to the identity of the bird, even if it is unseen, and once heard it is not easily forgotten. In contrast there are the soft, organ-like "warblings" and "pips," given when the birds are close to one another or when the male is displaying to the female in courtship. It is not yet known whether all the calls recorded are made by both sexes. An interesting field for future work lies in observing similarities or differences of song and associated behaviour between the North and South Island subspecies of Saddleback.

REFERENCE

Andersen, J. C., 1926: *Bird-Song and New Zealand Song Birds*. Whitcombe and Tombs. 215 pp.



SHORT NOTE

A LITTLE WHIMBREL IN MANUKAU HARBOUR

On 28/3/64 we were watching at Karaka a loose flock of waders being driven towards us by the rising tide. A small party of godwit was feeding as it came in. We noticed a smaller, dark brown bird being chivvied occasionally by the godwit. Suddenly it would turn and viciously pursue one of the larger birds, then resume feeding. J.U. was first to get her glasses on to it and notice its down-turned bill. It was 180 yards away so I used my 30 X telescope and noted some light pattern somewhere on its head but only for an instant and not clearly. Some dogs then put up the whole party of birds which flew towards us and then wheeled away, backs fully exposed. We had plenty of time to train our binoculars on to the smaller bird and to see that it showed no light on the upper surface. Size, colour and bill left no doubt as to its being a Little Whimbrel, *Numenius minutus*.

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