INCREASING NUMBERS OF SOUTH ISLAND PIED OYSTERCATCHERS VISITING NORTHERN NEW ZEALAND

By R. B. SIBSON

When nesting is over on the shingle riverbeds of the South Island, many thousands of Pied Oystercatchers *(H. o. finschi)* move northward to spend the latter half of summer, including the hottest months, autumn and winter on the harbours and estuaries of northern New Zealand. Some reach the far north at Ninety Mile Beach and Parengarenga; but the biggest concentrations are found in the Firth of Thames and the harbours of Manukau and Kaipara. Census figures obtained in 1965 suggest that at least 10,000 *finschi* oystercatchers now winter on the coast of Auckland and Northland.

This abundance of South Island Pied Oystercatchers in the north seems to be a comparatively recent development. During the last quarter of a century, there has evidently been, as with the Wrybill *(Anarhynchus frontalis)* a striking increase in the total population, so that in winter many more are being forced to forage further afield and to survive by migration. At the same time, as might be expected in an expanding species which takes two or three years to mature, there has been a correspondingly significant increase in the number of non-breeders which now pass the summer in flocks on northern beaches and tidal flats (v. Table I).

MANUKAU HARBOUR

The South Island Pied Oystercatcher has been known as a winter visitor to Manukau Harbour since about 1880, the evidence being two skins locally collected and now in the Auckland War Memorial Museum. After a long interval the next report comes from the diaries of C. A. Fleming who in 1936 noted a flock of c. 24 in March and September on the flats near Puketutu, then known as Bull's Island, and Ihumatao. About this time, i.e. the mid-1930's, R. A. Falla was making notes on a flock of 2000 - 3000 which was accustomed to winter in the estuary of the Waimakariri on the Canterbury coast. Yet it is curious that neither E. F. Stead (1) nor H. Guthrie-Smith (2) devoted a chapter or even a few paragraphs to *finschi,* though both these great naturalists were interested enough in the other birds typical of South Island riverbeds.

In the years before 1940 when the shooting of shore-birds was permitted by law, Oystercatchers were likely to meet with a warm reception in Manukau Harbour: for the flats about Puketutu and Ihumatao were a Mecca for suburban pot-hunters; while on the Karaka coast, the shellbanks at Kidd's Bay, although ornithologically *terra incognita,* were heavily manned with godwit-shooters, when the tides were suitable.

My own studies of shore-birds along the eastern shores of Manukau Harbour began in 1939 and at somewhat irregular intervals I was able to visit roosts and feeding grounds between Otahuhu and Wiri. In

the early 1940's *finschi* was a rare bird in the area which I had under observation. For instance, more than three years were to elapse before I found an example near Puketutu; and that was a single bird on 19/4/42. In the same year on March 29th I found four at Pukaki Creek — very near where the vast new airport is; and 25 on 4/10/42 at Puhinui; so it is likely that a sizeable flock had wintered in that less accessible area. In subsequent winters bigger flocks appeared; and in 1945 after c. 450 had wintered. c. 100 non-breeders remained to spend the summer. As a result of this apparent and sudden increase I was persuaded to publish my findings (4). Since then twenty years have passed; but the increase appears to continue. More observers are making their contribution. In 1946 D. A. Urquhart began to send in valuable information from the Karaka coast. Censuses which aimed at covering all the significant parts of Manukau, both in summer and in winter were instituted; and under the organization of H. R. McKenzie the coverage has become very thorough. Even so, there are still awkward corners in Manukau, and the census figures are likely to be minimal.

These oystercatchers, as they have increased, have either re-occupied former feeding-grounds and roosts, long disused, or have discovered new ones. Thus, about 1953 a few began to frequent the rocky bays in the vicinity of the Onehunga-Mangere bridge, where children play and small boats are launched or lie at anchor. Now *finschi* is a familiar bird there and at full-tide up to 800 have been counted on a small shellbank, which has become an habitual roost at the end of very suburban Kiwi Esplanade. Much the same could be said of 'The Narrows' at Weymouth. In recent years the face of Manukau has been violently reshaped by man and the reshaping is likely to continue. As the constructors of the new Auckland Airport thrust their huge runway further and further over the tidal flats between Pukaki and Ihumatao, they encroached upon a rich feeding ground for many thousands of waders but at the same time they provided a most handy and spacious roost, which Godwits, Stilts, Oystercatchers, Knots, Dotterels and Wrybills were not slow to use. 2000 oystercatchers alone, rising solidly together, would pose a problem when the airport came into use. Census returns now show that there are at least a dozen high-tide roosts which are in fairly regular use around the whole harbour.

FIRTH OF THAMES

The spectacular increase suggested by the Manukau figures is corroborated by those from the Firth of Thames; where, for example, the number of summering non-breeders in 1965 exceeded any winter-count made in the 1940's. On my first visit which was made in mid-July 1941, I was surprised and delighted to find a substantial flock of *finschi*, the more so because at that time I had not seen a single oystercatcher in Manukau. A few weeks later H. R. McKenzie accompanied me to the Miranda coast and we were so impressed by its ornithological possibilities that we decided to try to arrange for at least one visit a month. Because of its comparative remoteness and the roughness of the local roads at that time, shore-birds on the west coast of the Firth of Thames had been hunted, it may be assumed, much less severely than those in Manukau. In the Firth of Thames these oystercatchers mainly frequent, both for feeding and roosting, two favourite areas; one stretching from Whakatiwai to the old limeworks

at Miranda creek; the other in the south-east corner along the stony foreshore near Thames itself. The big intervening stretch of muddy flats, into which the Waihou, Piako, Waitakaruru and Kairito debouch, is at present not much used by oystercatchers. Consequently, it is easier to obtain accurate counts and the figures should be more reliable than those for Manukau.

KAIPARA HARBOUR

Because of its great size and awkward shape, Kaipara Harbour will long continue to baffle the efforts of those who try to make an accurate count of its shorebirds. But from observations made in different seasons and at different points of access, it had become evident that this vast inlet must be an important wintering area, perhaps the most important in the North Island. The size of flocks of summering non-breeders at Waionui Inlet in 1953 and 1954 suggested a bigger wintering population than that of the Firth of Thames. On 16/4/61 there were c. 1200 near Tapora; and on 26/5/63 the high tide brought more than 2500 to Jordan's. When a Field Study Course was held on the Kaipara in mid-January 1965, bad weather, including gale-force winds, hindered counting. Nevertheless the very respectable tally of 3230 was reached. The figure for mid-winter is likely to be considerably higher.

TABLE 1 — Numbers of S.I. Pied Oystercatchers counted in Winter and in Summer in the Firth of Thames and Manukau Harbour

	Firth of Thames		Manukau Harbour	
	Wintering	Over-summering (Oct. 15-Dec. 15)	Wintering	Over-summering (Oct. 15-Dec. 15)
1941	75	0		
1942	130	1 (albino)		36
1943	90	0	194	?
1944	70	7	260	40
1945	44	9	450	c. 100
1946	88+	0	?500	35
1947	76	32	510+	100+
1948	148	46	710	113
1949	300	60	600	150
1950	310	34	680	?
1951	416	63	900	?
1952	580	13	527	40
1953	435	32	1111	167
1954	600	19	972	155
1955	640	58	1092	160
1956	830	31	1025	400
1957	730	44	850	500
1958	900	82	1160	270
1959	700	123	1535	350
1960	650	109	1720	475
1961	1280	185	2440	700
1962	700	131	3025	1220
1963	1146	66	4410	738
1964	835	152	4206	820
1965	1738	324	4500+	911

As the size of flocks has increased, some regular roosts may become overcrowded, especially during spring tides; and many oystercatchers, sometimes indeed the whole local population, are forced to desert the shore and look elsewhere for a resting place. Both in Manukau and Kaipara Harbours, *finschi* oystercatchers now readily resort to grassy 'resting paddocks' when tides are very high or the weather is boisterous. Most of their food, however, in the North Island is still found along the seashore, where there are wide tidal flats; yet, as was noted some years ago (5) they sometimes forage inland. An interesting instance of this came to hand at Tapora in mid-Kaipara. Here on 7/7/62 some thousands of birds of several species had been attracted to feed over wet pasture and ploughland, once the bed of a shallow lake, now drained. Together with c. 5000 Red-billed Gulls, were c. 30 Bar-tailed Godwits, a few Pied Stilts and c. 400 S.I. Pied Oystercatchers, as well as flocks of Starlings and Yellowhammers. Nearly all these birds were feeding busily. The lake-bed was about one mile inland; and the oystercatchers were clearly feeding there by choice and enjoying a change of diet; for the full tide left uncovered a huge acreage of sandy flats and the cool southerly wind was not strong enough to worry Wrybills or Dotterels on the adjacent beaches, though not a single *finschi* oystercatcher could be found remaining along them.

REFERENCES

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5 SIBSON, R. B., 1958: Notornis VII, 206-207.
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SHORT NOTE

"PADDLING" IN RED-BILLED AND BLACK-BILLED GULLS

Fordham's (1963) reference (*Notornis* 10, 206) to "paddling" in the Black-backed Gull *(Larus dominicanus)* reminded me of similar behaviour seen in the two smaller species of Gull. I have seen this once since reading Fordham's account. It was on 8/2/64: a very warm day (c 80° F) with a moderate S.E. wind. A mixed flock of Red-billed Gulls *(L. scopulinus) and* Black-billed Gulls *(L. bulleri)* were feeding on a sandy flat at the Waimakariri mouth. This flat was periodically covered by a wave of about two inches. As both species showed the same behaviour only one description is given. The bird would work its feet into the soft sand by rapid "marking time" and this caused it to move slowly backwards. The sand around the feet was considerably disturbed and the birds were seen occasionally to snatch some small item of food and eat it. Later examination revealed a large number of small polychaete worms in the sand. Having worked itself some few feet backwards each bird would step out and either stand watching the others or return and work a similar stretch. A similar "marking time" was seen in Red-billed Gulls at the Heathcote-Avon estuary by Miss E. Andrews (pers. comm.). This observation was in early March 1966 and would probably be of the same behaviour pattern.

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