

## BIRDS OF SIMMONDS ISLANDS

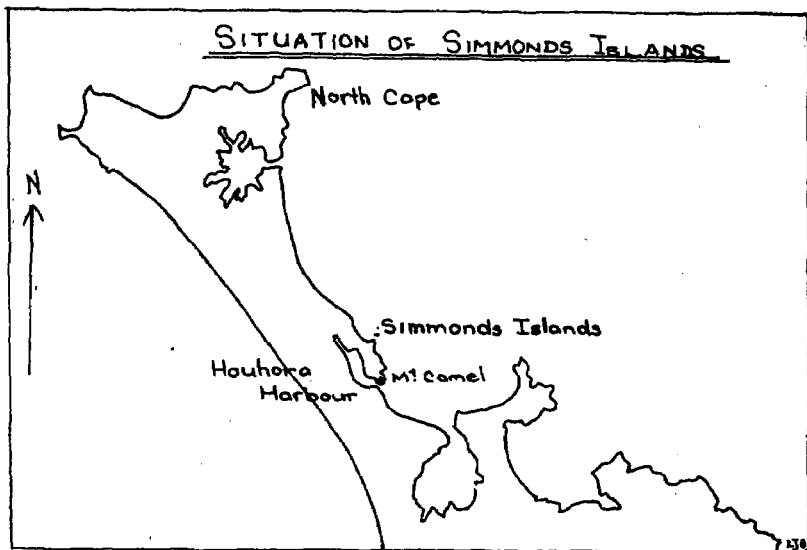
By LOIS J. WAGENER, *Auckland Museum*

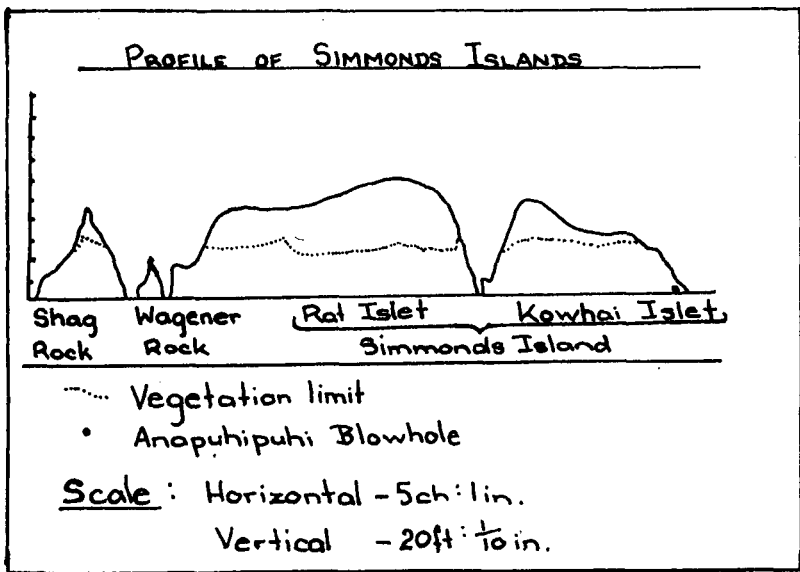
Simmonds Islands are situated half a mile from the mainland and four miles north of Houhora Harbour, Northland.

They were visited on the 6th and 7th December 1965, by Miss J. L. Fagan, the writer and Mr. Alan Wagener, the latter staying only one day. As no one had, as far as we know, previously visited the islands to study the bird life, the above mentioned visit was intended to list the birds, and carry out observations as far as possible. The party left from Mt. Camel, Houhora Harbour, and on our return trip we took the opportunity of briefly investigating the sea cliffs between the islands and Cape Perpendicular (north heads of Houhora Harbour).

The group is oriented in a N.W.-S.E. direction and consists of three rock stacks and two small islands. These islands are referred to in this paper as islets, because they are joined by a boulder beach: together they comprise Simmonds Island proper. To the west of Simmonds Island are two rock stacks, Wagener and Shag Rocks. A third rock, Hapuku Rock, is over a quarter of a mile north and here the water reaches a depth of over 25 fathoms.

Kowhai Islet is the easternmost islet of the group. It is three acres in extent and rises steeply to a narrow central ridge 50 to 75 feet above sea level, and 130 yards long. It is covered with low, wind-shorn scrub, in which flax, taupata, and *Astelia* are the dominant species. Little vegetation grows below the 50 foot contour except ice-plant, which is densest on the N.W. and W. slopes of the islet. Throughout the





vegetation burrows and tracks of the Little Blue Penguin occur. To the S.E. is the Anapuhipuhi Blowhole, which, even with calm seas, produces a spray rising 40 to 45 feet.

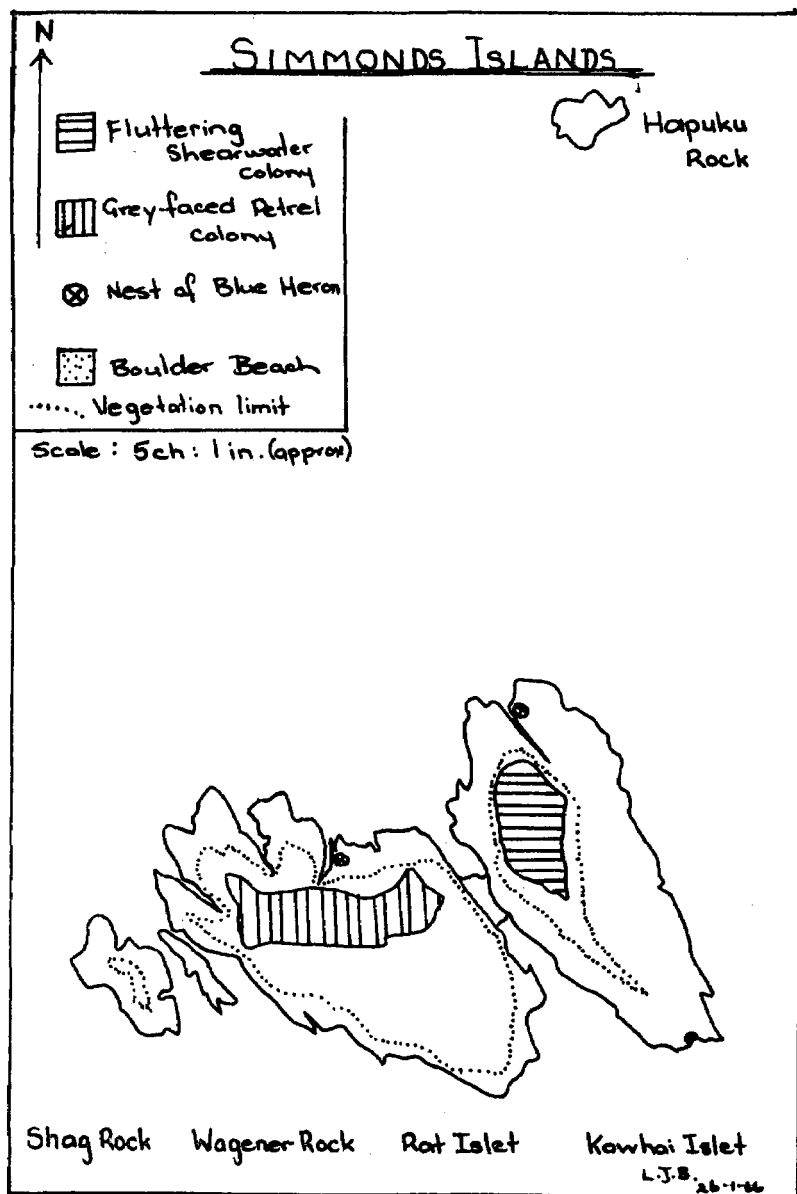
Rat Islet is almost dome-shaped, and is approximately four and a half acres in extent. It rises abruptly to form a plateau 200 yards long and varies between 55 and 130 yards in width. This slopes gently S.E.-N.W., the highest point being 120 feet above sea level. The plateau is covered in dense scrub, the dominant species being flax, taupata, *Hymenanthera*, *Astelia* and tawapou. On the top of the east cliff are several small pohutukawa trees, and on the highest part of the plateau cabbage trees appear, growing three to five feet above the vegetation cover. The vegetation is here, also, undermined by numerous penguin tracks and burrows.

Wagener Rock rises abruptly to a peak 45 feet above sea level. Small ledges on the northern face provide roosts for Pied Shags. The vegetation cover is predominantly taupata, ice-plant and pohutukawa.

The westernmost island of the group is Shag Rock which is almost vertical and rises to an apex 90 feet above sea level. About 70 feet above sea level there is a series of small ledges. The southern cliff is devoid of vegetation owing to the presence of Pied Shags. The remainder of the stack is unevenly covered above the level of 50 feet with vegetation very similar to that of Wagener Rock.

Hapuku Rock is 45 yards long and 25 yards wide, about  $\frac{1}{8}$  acre in extent, and is completely bare of vegetation. It rises 20 to 30 feet above the water and is often covered during high seas.

Skinks are present on both Rat and Kowhai Islets in large numbers. One brown gecko was seen on Rat Islet.



The sea surrounding the group is deep and rich in fish. While we were on the island many large schools of fish were seen especially at sunrise and sunset. On the return trip Miss Fagan and the writer were taken by Mr. Freddy Blucher, a local fisherman, around the islands. One large school of maomao and one of kahawai were observed; the latter were being 'worked' by Gannets and White-fronted Terns.

The islands were known by the Maori as 'Motukiore' (meaning "Island of Rats.") Today the local people refer to the islands as the "Rat Islands." The writer, however, found no evidence of rats, either Maori (*Rattus exulans*) or introduced (*R. rattus* and *R. norvegicus*).

Mutton-birding appears to have been carried out, to a small extent, during the time of Maori settlement on Mt. Camel. Since then the birds appear to have remained untouched.

The ornithology of this island group is of much interest and at least one of the species found breeding in considerable numbers on the islands is found elsewhere in the far north only as individual pairs or small colonies (Little Blue Penguin). The following tables show the approximate numbers of bush and sea birds breeding on the islands.

Species	Rat Islet	Kowhai Islet
Starlings	35+ pairs	30+ pairs
Silvereye	6 pairs	2 pairs
Grey Warbler	4 pairs	3 pairs
Dunnoek	1 pair	—

Species	Rat Islet	Kowhai Islet	Rock Stack
Little Blue Penguin	75+ pairs	50 pairs	5 pairs
Grey-faced Petrel	35+ pairs	—	—
Fluttering Shearwater	—	15+ pairs	—
Pied Shag	—	—	9+ pairs
Blue Heron	1 pair	1 pair	—

#### LITTLE BLUE PENGUIN

Nesting in large numbers on both islets and on Shag Rock. The greatest concentration of burrows is just below the 50 foot contour on the northern cliffs of Rat Islet. A large fissure in the rock provides numerous places for breeding. The guano below varies from  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch to  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch in depth. The characteristic penguin smell was always present. Newly laid eggs and partly fledged chicks were found side by side in the fissure. Burrows were found on all parts of the islet.

On Kowhai Islet the burrows are most concentrated on the north-western and western portions of the island. Both newly laid eggs and almost fully fledged chicks were found. A well defined track zig-zagged its way through the ice plant, up the almost vertical cliff to the central ridge where burrows were most dense. Owing to the thick nature of the scrub it was difficult to establish the density of burrows per hundred square yards. However, after careful investigation of the area an estimate of 30 was reached. On both islands burrows containing eggs and chicks were found in sheltered places on the cliffs.

During the day many vacant burrows were found, most of the birds apparently having finished nesting. One egg was collected from

a deserted nest located about 20 feet above sea level and is in the Auckland Museum collection (Av 124.59). The second egg of the clutch was broken.

A bright night and a full moon may have accounted for the comparatively small numbers of birds heard coming in shore.

#### FLUTTERING SHEARWATER

Fifteen burrows were found on north and north west faces of the Kowhai Islet. The burrows were either partly cleaned out or occupied. No birds were found in the burrows during the day; two birds were heard calling at 9.30 p.m. on the evening of the 6th. White and dark feathers were found.

#### GREY-FACED PETREL

Between 35 and 40 burrows were found on the north and north west slopes of Rat Islet. None of the burrows was occupied at the time of the visit. A damaged egg was found and is in the Auckland Museum collection (Av 147.56).

#### GANNET

During the day small flocks of five to ten birds were fishing around the island. At dusk approximately 20 roosted on the north east portion of Hapuku Rock.

#### BLACK SHAG

One bird was roosting on Wagener Rock, and three were fishing in the surrounding waters. These birds did not settle on the stacks but flew north to the mainland.

#### PIED SHAGS

28 birds were sitting on the south and south west cliffs of Shag Rock. Nine occupied nests contained young apparently at all stages of development and two young birds were fishing in the small inlet between the two stacks. Birds were seen arriving and leaving the stack frequently.

Five birds were roosting on Wagener Rock, but there was no evidence of nests.

Mr. Blucher reports that the stacks are used on occasions as a roost by very large numbers of shags. At these times, Mr. Blucher says, the rock is almost completely covered by birds. Many birds were seen fishing in the surrounding waters, but did not appear to have any association with the stacks.

#### BLUE HERON

Individual birds were sitting on both islets. A nest containing two eggs, almost ready to hatch, was found in a rocky crevice on the north slope of Kowhai Islet. Both parents left the nest as soon as unfamiliar noises were heard. A nest on Rat Islet was unoccupied at the time of the visit, but it was apparent that chicks had been reared and had since left the nest.

#### BLACK-BACKED GULL

Common; many seen on rocks around the island, and fishing in the surrounding waters.

#### RED-BILLED GULL

An uncommon bird at the time of the visit. Three were sitting on Hapuku Rock on the morning of the 7th.

**WHITE-FRONTED TERN**

Roosting in small numbers on Hapuku Rock. Flying in flocks up to 13 in number, between the two islets, and fishing in flocks up to 75 around the islands.

**GREY WARBLER**

Four pairs were seen just before dusk in the pohutukawa trees on Rat Islet. On Kowhai Islet at dusk three pair were noted feeding in the taupata not far from where the writer and Miss Fagan spent the night. Just after dawn Grey Warblers could be heard calling from one islet to another.

**BLACKBIRD**

The Blackbird appears to be only a visitor to the islands. One bird was heard calling at about 2 p.m. on the 6th, from Rat Islet. It was later frightened by the party, gave an alarm and flew in the direction of the mainland.

**DUNNOCK**

One pair was nesting in very dense taupata in the north of the central plateau of Rat Island. Just before dusk the male and female birds were communicating with one another from flax bushes above the cliffs. About 9 a.m. the following morning both birds were seen feeding on the ridge of Kowhai Islet.

**SILVEREYE**

The islands support eight pairs of Silvereye, six of which were frequently seen together in the clump of pohutukawa trees on Rat Islet. The other two pairs remained confined largely to the taupata *Astelia* and flax on Kowhai Islet. A nest from the previous season (1964-1965) was taken from the plateau of Rat Islet. It is in the Auckland Museum collection (Av 34.51).

The Silvereye was the last passerine to be heard calling at dusk, and was the second to be heard at dawn.

**CHAFFINCH**

One male was flying among the vegetation on the Rat Islet plateau. It was later disturbed and left the islands for the mainland. There was no sign of this species breeding on the islands, but large numbers inhabit the adjacent mainland.

**STARLING**

The most common passerine of the islands (see tables). At the time of our visit the birds were breeding in rock crevices and ledges and on the bare ground under the vegetation. In most of the crevices and on the sheltered ledges the birds had made no attempt to construct any kind of nest, but had laid on the bare rock or weathered material. However, all the nests found under the vegetation were made from grass and small twigs.

Partially-incubated eggs and down-covered chicks were found together in the same crevice. Most of the eggs had hatched and the majority of the chicks were partly covered in ash-grey down.

Movement from the islands to the mainland usually took place in flocks varying from 15 to 40 in number. Small flocks left the island at about 6 a.m. and larger flocks returned between 6 p.m. and 6.30 p.m. The returning birds would circle the island four or five times before landing. Individual birds did not appear to move between the mainland and the islands in any great numbers.

The birds nesting on the Kowhai Islet returned to roost earlier than those on Rat Islet and became quieter about 20 minutes before the latter.

## BIRDS SEEN AT SEA BETWEEN HOUHORA HARBOUR AND SIMMONDS ISLANDS

### LITTLE BLUE PENGUIN

Two penguins were seen about three quarters of a mile from the mainland. The first was off Farmers' Point and the second off the Kowhai Headland.

### BULLERS SHEARWATER

Five birds were seen on the 6th flying south half a mile off Farmers Point.

### GANNET

Small flocks of up to ten birds were seen fishing up and down the coast on both trips. On the return trip approximately 40 birds were fishing at the entrance to Houhora Harbour.

### BLACK SHAG

Four were noticed drying their wings in Houhora Bay on the return trip and two were fishing in the water just off Cape Perpendicular.

### PIED SHAG

On the 6th, between Cape Perpendicular and the islands, 19 birds were fishing up the coast. On the return trip over 40 different birds were fishing or sitting on the rocks around the coast.

### BLUE HERON

South of Farmers Point two birds were seen flying along the coast on the 22nd of December. Mr. Alan Wagener and the writer investigated the cliffs around this area and found two nests, both of which contained fledged chicks.

### BLACK-BACKED GULL

Numerous birds were seen on both trips. The birds were also seen fishing in large flocks with the White-fronted Terns.

### WHITE-FRONTED TERN

Small flocks were seen on both trips fishing out at sea. On the return trip approximately 120 birds were fishing with the Gannets at the entrance to the Harbour.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writer is indebted to:

Miss J. L. Fagan for accompanying me to the islands.

Mr. Alan Wagener for the time and trouble he went to to transport us to the islands, and information given regarding the islands.

Also to Mr. and Mrs. R. D. Wagener for the loan of their dinghy and outboard motor, and the hospitality given during our stay in the area; and Mr. Freddy Blucher, for providing transport for our return trip and for information concerning the islands.

Thanks are also due to Miss J. H. Goulding, Herbarium Assistant, Auckland Museum, for identification of plant material collected during the visit.

I am grateful to Mr. E. G. Turbott, Director, Auckland Museum, for making the trip possible and for kindly reading the manuscript.