

LETTER

The Editor.
Sir,

SADDLEBACK NUMBERS ON HEN ISLAND

Having spent numerous periods on Hen Island since 1957, during which the distribution of Saddleback in various parts of the island has been closely observed, I feel competent to comment upon previous assessments of total numbers, and in particular to correct the impression of an abounding population given in *Notornis* XI, 176-181. The figure of 800 to 1000+ pairs in these pages is much in excess of other recorded estimates. I cannot think that numbers would fluctuate violently from year to year, or over a number of years.

An estimate of 300 birds was made in 1925, but only a small portion of the island was covered. In a more careful estimate made by Turbott *et al.* in 1939, they arrived at a total of "probably about 200 pairs" (*Emu* 40, 158-161).

In January, 1968, two parties organised by Graham Adams of Wildlife Service covered approximately one third of Hen, including some of the best habitat, and obtained sight records of 47 pairs, or their equivalent in single birds. This would mean sight records of about 140 pairs for the whole island, and would probably account for about half the total population, so that 280 pairs in all would be a fair estimate. Subsequent extensive transects and trips during mist-netting operations confirmed the estimate of sight records being about half the total numbers. On the whole of the eastern side of the island there are large areas of doubtful habitat, with a few obviously suitable areas, where fair populations were observed.

Mr. Ian Rowley of C.S.I.R.O. Research Section, Canberra, was with us for the final three days in Jan./Feb. 1968, during which time he travelled the island extensively. He expressed the view that the total population does not exceed 300 pairs, and his expert opinion goes far to confirm our own ideas.

It is comforting to see a flourishing population on Red Mercury Island resulting from a liberation of 32 birds in 1966, and on Middle Chicken from a release of 23 in 1964. On this latter island a day was spent in January last when about half the island, certainly the better half, was carefully combed. Sixty birds were observed, so that the total population is between 90 and 120. If the substantial transfers made this year to Cuvier and Fanal Islands prove successful, the future of the North Island race of the Saddleback should be well assured.

— A. BLACKBURN