

KERMADEC ISLAND EXPEDITION REPORTS

THE SPOTLESS CRAKE (*Porzana tabuensis plumbea*)

By M. F. SOPER

Spotless Crakes were found only on the two Meyer Islets. They were seen exploring the tide-line, the adjacent zone of low, tangled, salt-tolerant vegetation, the accumulated litter under the coastal scrub association (which covers the greater part of the Meyer Islets) and the clumps of *Cyperus*, *Paspalum* and *Sicyos*. Notable was the frequency with which they hunted for food in trees and they appeared to be the only species utilizing this niche. They were as often to be seen obtaining insects from the foliage or around noddy nests as they were to be seen skulking about on the ground. They also explored petrel burrows and penetrated them to their furthest limits. Worthy of note is the frequency with which they were seen during both day and night.

The total population was difficult to assess and was probably fewer than 40 individuals. The Meyer Islets are small and easy to scramble round and when I left after a divided stay totalling 28 days I knew of only 14 pairs. The birds were always to be found in the same places and it was evident that territories were being adhered to.

Nests proved difficult to find and much time was spent searching likely areas of dense cover. The only occupied nest found was discovered purely by accident. On 27/12/66 I all but trod on a bird in an area of *Paspalum* overgrown with *Sicyos*. The crake exploded from under my foot and when I parted the vegetation four recently hatched chicks scrambled out of a nest into the surrounding cover.

The nest was a flat platform of grass, with no great amount of material, and was about 4 inches across. It was situated in the centre of a dense clump of *Paspalum*. There were no egg-shell remains. The chicks were dry and fluffy, about the size of a ten cent piece, covered in jet black down and had disproportionately long legs and feet. I estimated them to be about 24 hours old. When I revisited the site with camera equipment a short time later no sign of either adults or chicks could be found. Two unoccupied nests were found on North Meyer by J. F. Anton; one, in a clump of *Digitaria*, appeared recently constructed on 9/1/67, and the other, also in *Digitaria*, was apparently freshly vacated on 19/1/67. Both were similar in construction to the nest described above.

A large downy chick was seen on 23/11/66.

No crake was ever seen to fly in the accepted sense of the term. If cornered they would use their wings to propel themselves up steep banks or rock faces but so far as I could see, such "flying" was little more than wing-assisted running.

Like other rails, the Spotless Crakes on Meyer were found to be predators of other birds' eggs. This behaviour first came to notice when abandoned eggs of Wedge-tailed Shearwaters and Black-winged Petrels placed on the side of the track for collection on return to camp, regularly vanished without trace. Then on 16/1/67 J. F. Anton saw a crake eating the contents of a Kermadec Petrel's

egg in an unguarded nest. Presumably the eggs of the White-capped Noddy may also be included as part of the crake's diet and if this is so then it may in part explain not only the frequency with which crakes were seen in trees but also the otherwise inexplicable high disappearance rate of noddy eggs.

Measurements (in millimetres) of Adult Crakes collected on South Meyer Islet: (Measurements are those used by the Ornithological Society of New Zealand's Beach Patrol Scheme and described by Heather (1966).)

Dominion Museum Number	Date Collected	Sex	BILL			Mid-toe and Claw	Tarsus	Wing	Tail
			Length	Width	Depth				
12400	27/12/66	M	22	7.2	7.7	39.5	30	85	45.7
12401	26/12/66	F	18.7	5.7	7	37.3	29	81	46

REFERENCE

HEATHER, B. D., 1966: A Biology of Birds. Teach and Test Publications Ltd., Lower Hutt.



SHORT NOTE

A NOTE ON THE LOCAL DISTRIBUTION OF BULLERS SHEARWATERS

Over the past ten years there seems to have been a noticeable increase in the numbers of Bullers Shearwaters (*Puffinus bulleri*) about coastal waters south of Auckland.

Notes kept on East Coast passages up to five years ago show that Bullers could be expected in decreasing numbers across the Bay of Plenty, with an increase in numbers about the East Cape. They were then seen in smaller numbers off the East Coast; and always noted, but again in small numbers, about the Wairarapa Coast. Only rarely were they noted south of Cook Strait.

On the West, the shipping to Westport from Cape Reinga passes well off the coast, and it was unusual to see these Shearwaters more than sixty miles south of Reinga. From Beach Patrol records it is obvious that some move south of this but closer into the coast.

Last year (1968) on the East Coast large numbers were seen about East Cape, rafts of up to two hundred birds being not uncommon. In summer there were invariably Bullers Shearwaters in view south to Lyttelton and they were regularly seen between Lyttelton and Dunedin, an area where years ago they were very rarely recorded.

On the West Coast of the South Island in mid May 1969 20+ Bullers were seen off Westport and 30+ just north of Greymouth; and a few between Cook Strait and Greymouth. A fortnight later on 2/6/69 as I sailed south in daylight from Cape Brett only 4 were seen near the Poor Knights. It was obvious that most of the population had moved away and only a few laggards remained. Then on 2/9/69 when our position was three miles north of North Cape lighthouse (1300 hrs; wind S. 05 knots; air temp. 64°; sea temp. 60°F.) I spent about 40 minutes studying a gathering of well over 5000 petrels, shearwaters and gulls. To me the most interesting were three Buller's Shearwaters, my first for the new season.

— JOHN JENKINS