

SONG THRUSHES FORAGING ON MUDFLATS

Following a short field trip to Golden Bay and the base of Farewell Spit early during October, 1969, the writer was able to spend one day in the Nelson area. Together with F. Boyce (Regional Representative, O.S.N.Z., Nelson) and F. Climo (Conchologist, Dominion Museum), a trip to Rabbit Island, Tasman Bay, was planned for the 10th October to search for waders and to investigate the tidal flats surrounding this island.

When we reached Rough Island the tide had just started to go out and small mud banks were emerging from the otherwise still flooded mudflats between the island and the mainland. On one of these small exposed banks of mud, a few small birds were sighted, which turned out to be Song Thrushes *Turdus philomelos*. This unexpected sight prompted the writer to make further observations. The tide was going out rapidly at this stage, exposing larger areas of mud, and Song Thrushes in increasing numbers came flying out of the pine plantation on Rough Island and settled on the freshly exposed mud areas, picking up objects and returning to the plantation carrying them in their bills. It was soon realised that the Song Thrushes were collecting Mudsnailed *Amphibola crenata*, which they picked up from the mud, and either carried to a nearby stony area, or to the shore, where the snails were broken by hitting them repeatedly against a stone, in the usual manner Thrushes break land snails. After extracting the body of the snail from its shell, it was either carried away into the pine plantation, where it was presumably fed to nestlings, or the body of the snail was swallowed and the bird returned to the mudflat to forage again.

The impression given by the increasing numbers of Thrushes coming out onto the mudflat to feed as the tide receded was that the entire thrush population of the island was waiting for the tide to go out, and when this occurred, feeding started. It was, however, impossible to make an accurate count of the numbers of Song Thrushes feeding on this comparatively small area of mudflat, as presumably the same birds were flying to and fro from the pine plantation to the mudflat. Nevertheless, their number was estimated to be at least two dozen, and the largest number seen feeding on the mudflat at one time was 13 birds.

During a short walk at the western end of Rough Island it was noted that the population of Song Thrushes on the island was unusually high, whereas only one Blackbird was seen. On returning to the beach, about one hour following the first observations, Thrushes were still seen collecting mudsnails on the now completely exposed mudflats, and large numbers of broken snail shells were found along the entire shoreline bordering the mudflats.

The only explanation for the high population density of Song Thrushes on Rough Island is their unusual adaptation to feeding on the surrounding mudflats, where the supply of mudsnails is plentiful all the year round. The island on its own, because of its very dry sandy and gravelly nature, would not be able to support more than a few pairs of Thrushes if they were dependent on their normal food, such as earthworms, landsnails and insects.