GREY TERNLETS IN THE BAY OF PLENTY

By R. A. FALLA

The occasional vagrant status of the Grey Ternlet *Procelsterna albivitta* in New Zealand has hitherto been based on three or four sight records, usually single birds, off the coast of Northland between Cape Maria van Diemen and Waipu. The largest number recorded was four off Cape Karikari in January 1951 (Fleming et al. 1953, 52). Much more significant evidence of status can now be recorded from the Bay of Plenty.

When taking part in skin diving exercises off White Island on 25 January 1970 Mr. Dale Pomeroy of Wellington noticed conspicuous flocks of a tern unknown to him congregated on and flying about the precipitous Volkner Rocks north-east of White Island. As a staff cameraman of the National Film Unit he was equipped, as a secondary assignment, to film oceanic birds for a planned nature series, and secured a good cinematographic record which shows impressive flocks of ternlets rising from the steep upper crags of the rock. His estimate of numbers was a thousand or more. A few days later, on 29th January, Mr. Pomeroy went by launch, from Whitianga to the vicinity of the Alderman Islands for further bird photography. Here he was interested to find more of his strange terns using as a roost the Sugarloaf Rock which lies about 2 miles north of the main group. They were in lesser numbers; but closer approach by launch to this small pyramid enabled him to film the birds perching, flying, and feeding at closer quarters than had been possible at the Volkners. The film confirms that the birds are undoubtedly Grey Ternlets.

In a somewhat superfluous additional exercise I accompanied Messrs. Halliday and Pomeroy on a further trip from Whitianga, arranged by the National Film Unit, on 4/3/70, armed with a permit from the Department of Internal Affairs in case landing could be made. The ternlets were still there, about 200 of them. On the previous day they had all been seen perched in cavities on the face of the rock, but on 4th, food must have been abundant, as flocks of up to fifty detached themselves at intervals and flew purposefully to areas where they hovered and dipped in the dainty fashion so often described in their known sub-tropical haunts. This quick food-finding reaction of the ternlets seemed to trigger off most of the movement of Red-billed Gulls, flocks of which were resting on the adjacent lower reef. Soon after the gulls had moved into the feed patch the ternlets invariably detached themselves from the melee and sought less disturbed waters elsewhere.

Landing, at least with gear and equipment, was not practicable in the easterly conditions prevailing, but it was not difficult to see the birds in the shallow cavities in the pudding-stone formation of the rock face. There was no sign of nesting, though some of the birds, with shorter tails and a dull brownish tinge in the grey of the back, appeared to be immature. Except in the immediate vicinity of the Sugarloaf no further ternlets were seen near the Alderman Islands. On the way back, about 5 miles northwest of Sugarloaf, two flew past us.

[Pomeroy & Woodward

Plate IV — Alderman Islands (Sugarloaf left foreground). Enlarged from 16mm. ektachrome.

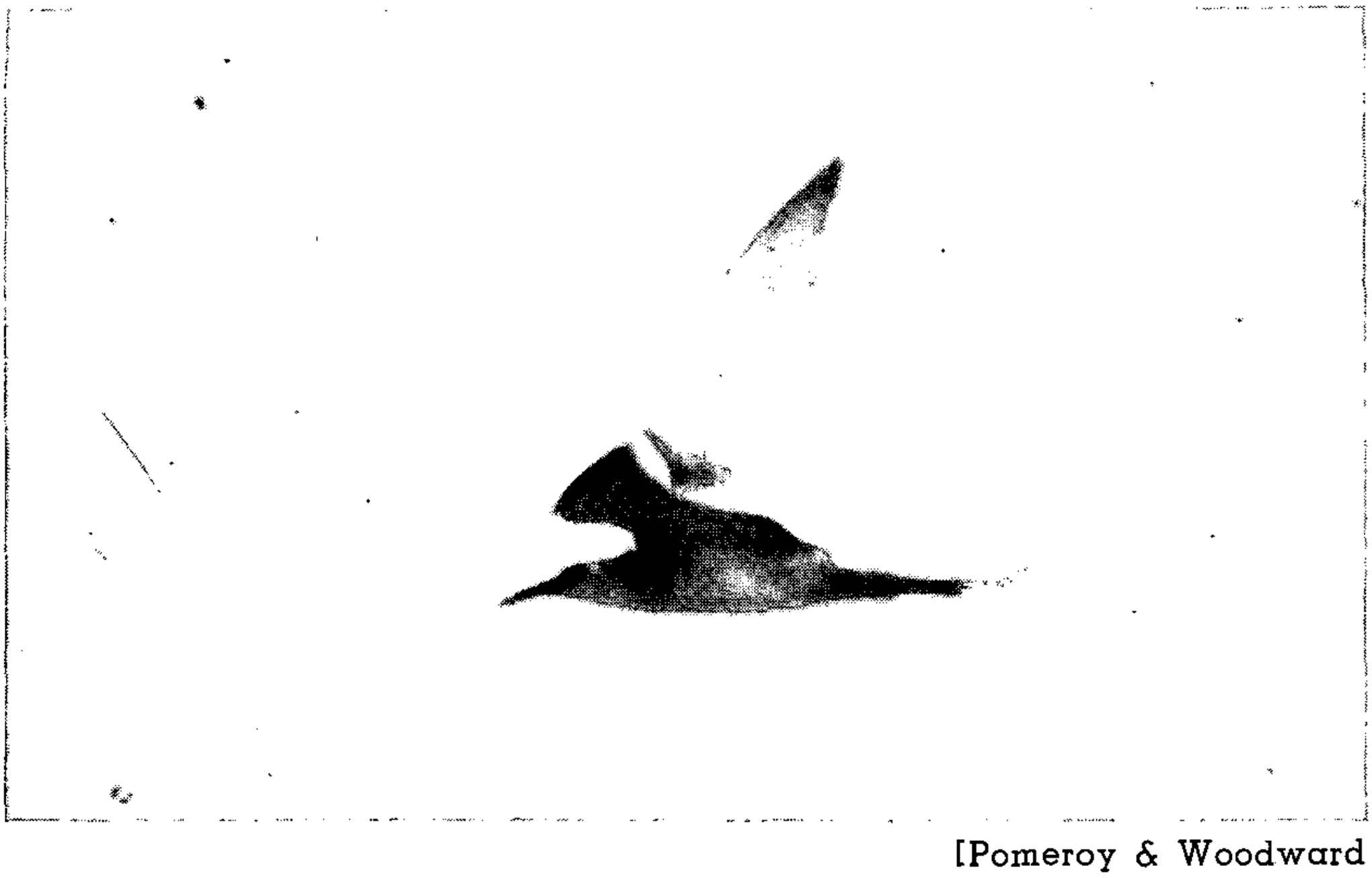

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Plate V — Grey Ternlet off Volkner Rocks, Bay of Plenty.

These records raise several questions, the first of which is whether this ternlet has become established in New Zealand waters as a breeding species. The considerable number at the Volkner Rocks suggests that it has. The more difficult question of whether the numbers have built up gradually by breeding, or arrived as a mass invasion is not so easy to answer. Neither Volkner Rocks

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Plate VI — Grey Ternlets off Sugarloaf, Alderman Islands, 4/3/70.

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Plate VII — Grey Ternlet off Sugarloaf, Alderman Islands, 4/3/70.

nor the Sugarloaf at the Alderman Islands have received much critical attention in recent years. The Volkners are noted by Wodzicki and Robertson (in Hamilton and Baumgart 1959, 71-72) as a breeding station for Red-billed Gulls and White-fronted Terns. The rocks have intermittently been used as a bombing target by the Royal New Zealand Air Force and the Royal New Zealand Navy. Interest in the Sugarloaf Rock has been more sustained, but none of it recent. There were certainly a few Gannets and greater numbers of White-fronted Terns and Red-billed Gulls nesting there in 1921-26 (Sladden and Falla, 1928, 285-6). Fleming and Wodzicki (1952, p. 61, fig. 24) concluded that the Gannets had abandoned the site, basing their conclusion on an aerial photograph and reports of several observers in 1947-48. It may be assumed that there was no detectable establishment of ternlets at Sugarloaf and probably not at Volkners between 1921 and 1951 when the late Bernard Sladden cruised and recorded meticulously more than twice yearly in both areas. The year 1951, in which four ternlets were observed in Doubtless Bay could possibly have marked the beginning of a population extension. It is not inconceivable that a slow build-up has gone unrecorded over twenty years. Both rocks are well off the beat of bird-watchers bound for the Mercury, Alderman or White Islands, and both are inaccessible in all but the calmest of weather. At any distance ternlets are invisible when standing in crevices. The more conspicuous gulls and terns which are always there in numbers obscure any small groups of Grey Ternlets that happen to fly with them. Both areas are frequented by fishing launches but their occupants would be unlikely to distinguish species in the mixed bird assemblages, or to consider it worthy of report if they did. On the several days of recent observation the ternlets seldom fed more than 100 yards from the home rocks, and were never on the wing for long. Solitary terns with much grey in the plumage are notoriously difficult to identify or even see over the open sea, and the Grey Ternlet is the most cryptic of them all. In spite of these reasonable excuses, it seems instructive in the circumstances to recall that, following the presentation of several papers on seabird distribution at the August 1969 Conference of the Marine Sciences Society, Mr. A. G. York asked, in the course of discussion, why authors so often devoted much space to the plotting of petrel occurrences and distribution, and seldom mentioned terns !

The next exercise, except for survey to ascertain if the birds nest next spring, might be one to detect whether any trends in hydrological conditions help to explain why birds characteristic of sub-tropical convergence habitat are finding the Bay of Plenty so congenial.

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