

BIRDS OF LITTLE OHENA ISLAND

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SUMMARY

The birdlife of all islands of the Mercury Group, with the exception of Little Ohena, has previously been recorded in detail; but owing to inaccessibility in all but ideal conditions, no record has been made of the birds of Little Ohena. A brief description of the island and its birdlife is given, in particular of the occurrence of the White-faced Storm Petrel *Pelagodroma marina*, which has not been found breeding on any other island of the Mercury Group.

INTRODUCTION

In the course of a survey of Cuvier Island and of five islands of the Mercury Group in June 1970, a party consisting of D. V. Merton (leader), I. Crook, R. Simpson, all of Wildlife Service, Dr. I. A. E. Atkinson, Botany Div., D.S.I.R., A. H. Whitaker, Ecology Div., D.S.I.R., and the writer, landed on Little Ohena Island (more correctly Little Ohenau), and spent 24 and 25 June ashore. Landing is possible at one point only, and then under good conditions, for elsewhere the coastline consists of sheer cliffs. A steep climb to the backbone ridge to the only suitable camping area is involved.

We had expected to find the island comparatively unmodified by man, but there has obviously been considerable disturbance, the vegetation being largely of fairly recent origin. Exposed areas are very battered by salt and wind. There are ample signs of earlier Maori activity, including middens containing large numbers of Storm Petrel bones. Later in Whitianga, we had the opportunity of discussing Maori occupation of the Mercury Group with Mr. Ben Davis, oldest member of the Arawa sub-tribe Ngatihei, owners of the Mercury Islands until the recent gift to the Crown. He stated that within his lifetime no Maoris lived on any of the islands, presumably with the exception of Great Mercury, but visited them regularly for mutton-birding. He recalled that as a small boy he used to accompany his grandmother to Big Ohena Island in a rowing-boat, and she would regularly set fire to the vegetation.

DESCRIPTION OF ISLAND

Cliff-bound Little Ohena lies some 600 yds. north-east of Ohena Island, and has an area of about 14 acres. A ridge, rising to 160 ft. at its highest point, connects a fairly flat area of an acre or more at the northern end with an easy slope at the southern end, terminating in a high, attached, and vegetated stack. Many large pohutukawa grow on the northern 'plateau,' but otherwise the vegetation is generally a low canopy of karo, 12 to 15 feet high, with patches of houpara, wharangi near the margins, and *Hymenanthera* in more open places. The slopes above the landing are intensively burrowed by petrels, as are the western slopes generally, whilst there are considerable concentrations of burrows on the 'plateau' and the southern slope.

BIRDLIFE

Edgar (1962) and Skegg (1963) cover the birdlife of the Mercury Islands, with the exception of Little Ohena, very completely, and the only addition of note to their records is the Saddleback *Philesturnus carunculatus* now flourishing on Red Mercury Island,

following its introduction on 30/1/66. The population is well scattered, but will be limited in numbers, as the habitat is generally not comparable with that of Cuvier Island. Birds were seen in all situations, at the camp site, in the pohutukawa forest where previous sightings of adults and juveniles were mostly made, and surprisingly even in the low mapou scrub.

Falla (1934) recorded the White-faced Storm Petrel as breeding in the Mercury Islands, without defining the locality; but *in pers. comm.* states that he made three visits to Little Ohena between 1926 and the early 1950's. He found White-faced Storm Petrel and Flesh-footed Shearwater *Puffinus carneipes* breeding in numbers.

The following notes on species were made:

Of the *Procellariiformes*, we were too late to record the Flesh-footed Shearwater observed by Falla, as the fledglings take their departure in April (Falla *et al.* 1966). The Fluttering Shearwater *Puffinus gavia* was recorded as coming ashore in small numbers, the Allied Shearwater *P. assimilis* in greater numbers, and just a few Grey-faced Petrel *Pterodroma macroptera*. The White-faced Storm Petrel was not seen, as it was too early in the season, but we found three shells of the previous season's eggs, and there were indications of a high population. The Diving Petrel *Pelecanoides urinatrix* was present in considerable numbers, but not in concentrations comparable with those on Middle and Green Islands.

Of the bush birds, the Red-crowned Parakeet *Cyanoramphus novaeseelandiae* is common, as on all the Mercury Group; with the exception of Great Mercury. It was observed feeding on flowers of *Coprosma macrocarpa* and scratching in the litter for seeds. Another source of food on Middle Island was the apical shoots of tawapou *Planchonella novo-zelandica* and of the milk tree *Paratrophis banksii*. One Morepork *Ninox novaeseelandiae* was heard calling. The Fantail *Rhipidura fuliginosa* and the Grey Warbler *Gerygone igata* are present in small numbers, as are the Blackbird *Turdus merula* and the Dunnock *Prunella modularis*. The Bellbird *Anthornis melanura* is equally common with the Red-crowned Parakeet, numbering about 20 of each, and here it has an unusual dialect in its song. Small flocks of Silvereye *Zosterops lateralis* were recorded.

Several Northern Blue Penguin *Eudyptula minor* were seen coming ashore at the landing place, apparently the only spot accessible even to penguins; the usual Harrier *Circus approximans* was circling over the island as we landed; and two Kingfishers *Halcyon sancta* were observed perched on the summit of a stack off the north-western coast, and feeding round its shoreline. Goldfinch *C. carduelis* and Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* were recorded, and a small flock of Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* came from the mainland to roost.

DISCUSSION

Skegg (1963), writing of visits to the Mercury Islands in August 1962, and in the following November, says "seas again prevented our landing on Little Ohena, where both tuatara and White-faced Storm Petrels are said to be found." If tuatara are present, they must be few in number, for a thorough search by night revealed no trace of them. This is surprising in view of the

apparent absence of kiore *Rattus exulans*, for it has been found that where island communities of kiore are large, the tuatara is scarce, and *vice versa*. Neither Edgar (1962) nor Skegg (1963) found evidence of breeding of the White-faced Storm Petrel on any of the islands visited, so the breeding population recorded by Falla is apparently confined to Little Ohena; although B. D. Bell (*pers. comm.*) found the remains of the species in Harrier 'middens' on Double Island.

REFERENCES

- EDGAR, A. T., 1962: A Visit to the Mercury Islands. *Notornis* X, 1-15.
FALLA, R. A., 1934: The Distribution and Breeding Habits of Petrels in Northern N.Z. *Rec. Auck. Inst. Mus.* 1, 245-259.
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SHORT NOTE

ANOTHER OCCURRENCE OF GREAT KNOTS
IN NEW ZEALAND

A Rotorua party of the O.S.N.Z. visited Miranda, Firth of Thames, for the week-end 7th, 8th and 9th February, 1970, taking advantage of the very high tides of that period. They were joined by Miss Susan Fogarty and the H. R. McKenzies of South Auckland. The weather was fine, visibility good and birds were plentiful, both as to numbers and species.

On the 7th, with a rising tide, an inner flat of wet soft mud was being scanned for the counting of large and small waders, the latter among Pied Stilts, Bar-tailed Godwits, Lesser Knots and a few gulls, when I noted among the knots a bird with black markings on the upper surface and the whole of the breast. I directed the others of the party to it, and Ross McKenzie promptly identified it as a Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris*. Its larger size was evident when compared with a Lesser Knot *Calidris canutus* which stood a few inches from its side, both facing us. The crown was definitely but not strikingly striped. The black dots all over the breast were large and clearly defined on a white or light ground. The bill was dark or black and was longer and heavier than those of the surrounding Lesser Knots. The rump was not visible. A second, slightly less coloured bird, was soon found a few yards away, also among knots. Both were equally well seen again on the next day.

These birds so closely matched the description by Ian G. Andrew (*Notornis* 15, 207-209) and the accounts and pictures in the literature that there could be no doubt as to identity.

Rare waders are most often found during regular watching activities. The northern breeders often pose problems for most of their stay here because so many are dressed in drab grey and brown. Near the time of their return north, however, they assume part of their breeding colours so that identification is easier. This makes it well worth-while to keep a special watch in February, March and early April. The more uncommon birds seen by this party were Sharp-tailed, Curlew, Terek and Broad-billed Sandpipers, Red-necked Pintail, Large Sand Dotterel, Great Knot, Long-billed Curlew and Sanderling.

— MARGARET BROWN