

BLACK-BILLED GULLS EXTEND BREEDING RANGE NORTH

By N. M. GLEESON, SUSAN M. FOGARTY, J. L. PLAYER
and H. R. McKENZIE

Observers working on the Miranda coast, Firth of Thames, have long hoped that the Black-billed Gull (*Larus bulleri*) would begin to breed there. Each year when the main flock of up to 850 wintering birds went south between late September and early November for breeding, probably at Rotorua, up to 20 would stay at Kaiaua, 5½ miles (8.8 km) north of Miranda, or else halfway at Taramaire ("White Bridge"). Most of this small summering party would be *immature* birds, with a few adults, which were obviously non-breeders. For 30 years there had been no sign of breeding until 9 November 1967 when R. B. Sibson and others noted one or two showing what may have indicated a breeding urge. In 1968 and the subsequent years the hopes of the watchers were realised.

The following account details subsequent events. The observers responsible for each set of notes are J. A. Brown (J.A.B.), Susan M. Fogarty (S.M.F.), N. M. Gleeson (N.M.G.), T. R. Harty (T.R.H.), J. L. Player (J.L.P.), and H. R. McKenzie (H.R.McK.) who organised the watching (except for that by N.M.G.) and wrote the manuscript.

THE 1968-69 BREEDING

When checking the large Taramaire White-fronted Tern colony on 14 December 1968 S.M.F. and J.L.P. found two bulky gull nests, right inside the tern colony, but widely separated from each other, each with a Black-billed Gull sitting on two eggs. H.R.McK. was called and the birds and nests were closely examined.

S.M.F., J.L.P., H.R.McK.

On 28 December 1968 the tern colony was undisturbed but there was not the slightest trace of the gull nests. It was thought that someone may have destroyed them, thinking that the birds were Red-billed Gull and would be inimical to the terns. However it seems more likely that the nests were blown away as they were loosely sited high on the large bank of purely large cockle shell, with no holding foundation, or else the eggs could have hatched and the chicks taken by the parents from the colony and lost to predators, although in such case some trace of the used nests could have been expected.

S.M.F., J.L.P., T.R.H., H.R.McK.

One bird was present on 29 December 1968 and four on 15 January 1969. Two adults and two immatures of the previous season were there on 23 January 1969 and four immatures at Miranda. No further nesting was attempted.

S.M.F., H.R.McK and others.

THE 1969-70 BREEDING

N.M.G. visited the tern colony on 6 December 1969 and found four adult Black-billed Gulls and three nests, two well constructed, with two and one eggs and one nest at a rudimentary stage. They were at the southern end of the tern colony, which stretched far along the shellbank.

Returning in February 1970, he saw a group of gulls, including two juveniles, at the tide edge. Although the young were well able to fly out of his range the adults made repeated diving attacks.

It was well that N.M.G. had gone to photograph the terns because the Papakura and Clevedon members who usually attend closely to the Miranda coast did not visit between 18 November 1969 and 18 January 1970, being pre-occupied with exciting avian events at Karaka. Close attention to a mixed flock of small waders near the northern end of the tern colony caused an Auckland party on 30 November 1969 and a South Auckland party on 18 January 1970 to miss the gulls about 200 yards away at the southern end of the mass of nesting birds.

THE 1970-71 BREEDING

3 November 1970, at Taramaire, 7 adult Black-billed Gulls present.

H.R.McK. and others

7 November, no nests but gulls fishing in lagoon inside the shellbank and White-fronted Terns congregating on the bank.

N.M.G.

17 November, 7 nests or part nests, closely grouped in edge of tern colony, eggs 2, 1. 17 birds present.

S.M.F., H.R.McK and others.

22 November, 8 gulls with 6 nests, 2 being rudimentary. Eggs 3, 2, 1, 1. Terns now nesting.

N.M.G.

6 December, 6 nests, 3, 2, 2, 2, 2, 1. One White-fronted Tern chick in colony.

N.M.G., H.R.McK. and others.

19 December, 5 running chicks, 3 small chicks in a nest, 2 nests of 2 eggs and an egg broken in a nest by a thrown beer bottle. Vandals had also killed a patch of 28 small tern chicks.

S.M.F., H.R.McK. and others.

31 December, 13 adults and 7 running gull chicks. 1 dead chick in a nest, 2 nests with eggs 3, 2. The 7 chicks were larger than the tern chicks.

S.M.F., H.R.McK. and others.

5 January 1971, 7+ adults and the 7 running chicks of 31 December 1970, but the nests of 3 and 2 washed out. The eggs were not found. They had been in a narrow strip of tern chicks which had been destroyed by a break-through of the tide in a storm.

S.M.F., H.R.McK. and others.

6 January, A note by N.M.G. reads "At my arrival before high water I found the gulls on the tide-line in a compact group with 7 chicks, able to swim and run actively but not to fly. They were being shepherded by 6 to 8 adults.

"As the wind backed up the rising tide the non-flying tern chicks were crowded onto the southern end of the shellbank where my camera was placed. The party of gulls was forced to come within 30 to 40 feet, but was uneasy and the adults kept flying at me. They were an interesting sight, lined up in a row watching me, the chicks appearing 'goggle-eyed' in comparison with the adults (see Fig. 1).

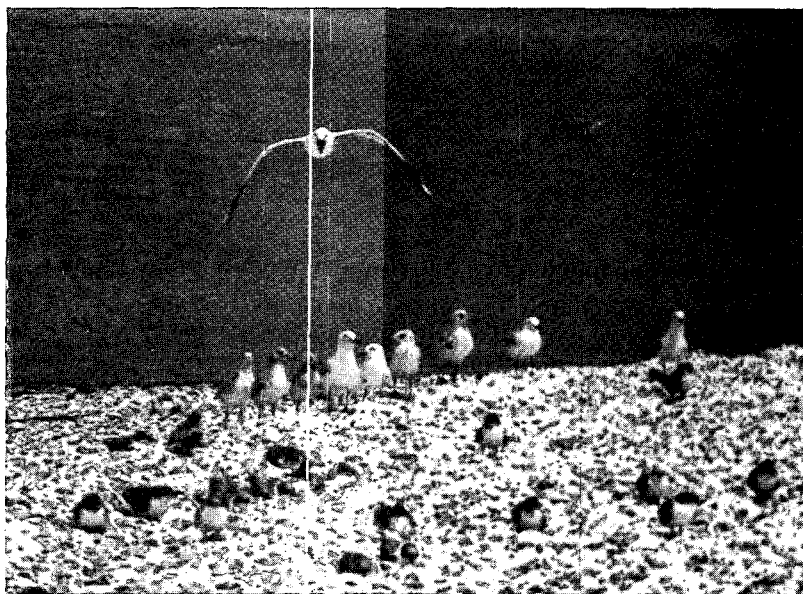


FIGURE 1 — Adult Black-billed Gulls shepherding young as rising tide drives them up from the mudflats on to the former nesting ground, Taramaire bank, Firth of Thames, 6 January 1971. Photo: N. M. Gleeson.

"About high tide the parents drove the chicks down to the edge of the water on the lee side of the bank, and, by appropriate movements and short flights over the water, persuaded five of the chicks to enter it and swim strongly towards the next shellbank, some 40 feet away. The adults flew slowly overhead, keeping pace with the swimmers (see Fig. 2).

"Two chicks remained and in response to further urging also swam across the intervening water, convoyed by a parent bird in the air, to rejoin their fellows on the further side.

"Throughout the whole period the birds had kept together as a compact group. While perhaps resembling the formation of 'creches' in some species it appeared that nearly all of the parents remained with the chicks, so that the behaviour was probably more a continuation or extension of the colonial nesting pattern.

"It is interesting to note that when young of the 1969-70 colony were able to fly the gulls still kept together in a group over the mudflats, and, on approach, an intruder would be dive-bombed by one of the adults in an attempt to drive him away."



FIGURE 2 — A "convoy." Adult Black-billed Gull watching over two chicks swimming across channel between shell banks, Taramaire bank, Firth of Thames, 6 January 1971.

Photo: N. M. Gleeson.

THE 1971-72 BREEDING

20 November 1971, Taramaire, Black-billed Gulls nesting again with terns, 3 nests, 2, 1 and an empty nest.

N.M.G.

23 November, 20 adults, 9 nests, 2, 1, 1 and other nests partly made. Many eggs in the tern colony, with about 1700 birds present.

H.R.McK. and others.

30 November, nests and eggs of all gulls and terns washed out and lost. 2 gulls standing idly.

J.A.B.

18 December, Following the loss of nests on Taramaire shellbank a new colony of some of both birds had been set up on No. 1 Outer Shellbank, one of two banks a quarter mile offshore and approachable only at dead low tide. With some tern nests were 4 Black-billed Gull nests, 3, 2, 1 and one nest unfinished. 7 to 9 adults were about the colony and a similar number, including some immatures, had a roost site further along the bank.

N.M.G.

28 December, The nests of 18 December gone, having been washed out by another storm and most of the terns had left. 4 adult gulls remained with two new and poorly constructed nests, one of which had an egg.

N.M.G.

Unfortunately no further observations could be made at this new site, which is difficult of access.

Breeding of this species had been reported previously only as far north as Gisborne and Rotorua so this extended range of 88 miles (140 km) from Rotorua is quite remarkable.

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