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FIELD NOTES ON BIRDS OBSERVED ON THE 'MOTUS' OF TWO ATOLLS (PENRHYN AND SUWARROW) IN THE NORTHERN COOK ISLANDS, 1968

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ABSTRACT

A listing, with accompanying natural history notes, is given of the birds observed during a visit in 1968 to the atolls of Penrhyn and Suvarrow in the Cook Islands.

TONGAREVA or PENRHYN, 9°S, 158°W.

12 August to 20 September 1968

The lagoon is roughly circular, about 40 miles in circumference and surrounded by a coral reef. The reef is as much as half a mile wide in places, either awash or just dry except for the number of 'motus' or islets of varying sizes which are strung along the reef like beads on a necklace. These vary between half an acre in extent to about two miles long by a half mile wide.

Only two motus are inhabited, by about 600 Cook Islanders, and on these we saw no birds except a few waders and Frigate Birds (*Fregata minor* and *F. ariel*) overhead. The remaining motus are visited only for the cultivation of coconuts and these are covered thickly with these palms, pandanus and 'toe,' a scrubby, low growing bush (*Cordia subcordata*). There are a very few small islets which have no coconut trees, which are seldom visited and which are known locally as 'bird' islands. It was on these that we found the greatest concentration of birds, though we saw members of every species mentioned near, or on, all the other uninhabited motus we visited.

The most numerous birds were the White Capped Noddies (*Anous minutus*) which were more plentiful than the Common Noddy (*A. stolidus*). White Terns (*Gygis alba*) always accompanied the former though in much smaller numbers. Lesser Frigate Birds (*Fregata ariel*) were everywhere, often diving on the noddies to make them

disgorge. We saw five or six waders on every motu we visited, and half a dozen Sooty Terns (*Sterna fuscata*) flying overhead was a fairly common sight. These were the birds most frequently sighted at sea on the entire voyage from the Galapagos to Samoa, even in mid Pacific 1500 miles from land.

We considered the reports of the local people to be fairly reliable since they are interested in birds which form a welcome variety in their monotonous diet. They slaughter great numbers of Frigate Birds at night, take Red Tailed Tropic Birds (*Phaethon rubricauda*) when they can get them and eat the eggs of both these species as well as those of the Noddies, Sooty Terns and Brown Boobies.

Common Noddy *Anous stolidus*:

Large numbers were seen on a coconut motu with White-capped Noddies and White Terns. We did not observe any nests but the birds were agitated and we saw many immature looking birds. There seemed to be quite a variation in colouring among the adult birds, some of them having a lighter buff bar across the belly and others with light buff or white patches under the wing.

We visited a quarter acre coral islet with a few sparse 'toe' bushes and as we approached a few Common Noddies rose off a bank of loose coral just above high water mark. Seven rudimentary nests made of a few leaves, twigs and bits of shell were observed on the coral with six fledglings and one egg.

More Common Noddies were seen nesting on an outcrop of dead coral on which grew a few small bushes. Nests were in shallow natural depressions in the coral and were quite neatly lined with dead leaves but with no shell.

White-capped Noddies *Anous minutus*:

These were seen nesting on two motus, one a seldom visited small motu, well covered with 'toe,' pandanus and some coconut. Large numbers were in the air and one was noted sitting on a nest in a pandanus, about twelve feet off the ground. The other was the 'bird' island. Many nests were found with either one egg or a nestling. These nests were in the crotches of the 'toe' bushes and a few in the lower branches of a 'puka' (*Pisonia grandis*) tree; all between six and ten feet from the ground. They were made of a pile of dead leaves with a slight depression in the centre and appeared to be cemented together with droppings. Some looked as though they had been used repeatedly and had attained quite a size.

We noted that the only two places in which we saw Common Noddies nesting there were no land crabs or their holes, which were otherwise ubiquitous. We suggest that perhaps the White-capped Noddy is the more successful breeder here as it nests out of reach of these crabs, instead of on the ground, as does the Common Noddy.

White Tern *Gygis alba*:

These terns, friendly and ethereally beautiful, were seen on all the lonely motus which we visited. Their call is a gentle squeak like a mouse or a bat. Nesting on one of the 'bird' islands, they shared the 'toe' bushes and half a dozen fine, tall 'puka' trees with Frigate Birds and White-capped Noddies. Eggs and fledglings were perched on the branches, usually six to ten feet from the ground, though one infant perched on a bare branch at least thirty feet from the ground and another was using the old nest of a Noddy. It seemed to us that these terns were considerably smaller than the *Gygis alba* we had seen in Tahiti.

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*:

A bird was found sitting on a nest on an outcrop of dead coral on the outer reef which was above sea level and covered with a few tufts of coarse grass. Two eggs, about the size of a pullet's, dull white with very slight brownish flecks and blue veining or blotches showing through, were examined in the round nest in a depression in the grass, made of leaves and a root or two.

A pair of adults were seen in flight and on various occasions what we took to be immature boobies were seen among the flocks of frigate birds, but the sighting was never good enough to determine if they were young *S. leucogaster* or the young of one of the other *Sula* species.

Red Tailed Tropic Bird *Phaethon rubricauda*:

We saw perhaps half a dozen, singly, and once a pair. On one sighting the bird was crouching under a low bush and only rose when we were almost touching it; it then shuffled off through the branches, looking like a wounded bird, and then took flight, quite unharmed. These birds are prized, both for the pot and for their red streamer tail feathers. We were told there was a conservation programme on Palmerston Island.

Sooty Terns *Sterna fuscata*:

These were not very plentiful, though quite frequently seen in flight. We were given six eggs as a gift. The yolks were bright orange. The local name is 'Tara' and they were said to nest on a 'bird' motu which we did not visit.

Lesser Frigate Birds *Fregata ariel*:

The greatest concentration was on and over the 'bird' island where the White Terns and Noddies were nesting, but the moment we set foot on the island they all took off, regarding man as a danger. We saw no signs of nests on the island, but as the birds flew off we had a good view of a dozen or so young. As far as we could judge they were fully grown but in immature plumage. During our stay we did not see many males, females and immature birds being considerably more numerous. We were informed that the Frigates do in fact nest on Tongareva, the eggs being taken for food. According

to local report the only species of banded birds ever taken here have always been *Fregata*, the bands originating from Australia and the U.S.A.

Asiatic Whimbrel *Numenius variegatus*:

Small parties of two to nine of these were seen on the open areas of old, bare coral with a little bush for cover. They fed at the sea streams which ran across the coral. The local name is 'Keewee' which approximates the sound of the cry.

Waders (locally known as 'Torea') —

Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis dominica*:

Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*:

These birds were usually seen together and were on every motu we visited. The greatest concentration was on a big coconut motu in the middle of which was a large, brackish pond, otherwise they were either feeding on sandspits running into the lagoon on the hottest, leeward side of the atoll, or just sunning on the black coral outcrops which gave them perfect camouflage. We found them very nervous and 'scarey.' They gave a musical, piping call with some variation, often 'tiddit-tiddit-tee,' and when alarmed, a single, sharp 'tweet.' According to local information they nest on Tongareva in June and July and leave about October, but we saw no nests.

SUVAROV (or SUWARROW), 13°S, 162°W. 3 to 13 October 1968

This atoll is about the same size as the former, but with a very much smaller land area, the motus being both fewer and smaller and the areas of sand and scrub covered coral, much greater. There is only one human inhabitant, Mr Tom Neale, an elderly New Zealander, who has lived there, off and on, since 1952, and was able to give us much information. Mr Neale is well known to many readers as the author of *An Island to Oneself. The Story of Six Years on a Desert Island* (Collins, 1966) in which he has described his time and way of life on this lonely atoll, 513 miles north of Rarotonga and 200 miles from the nearest neighbour, the atoll of Manihiki in the Northern Cooks.

The majority of the birds were concentrated at two points, one at each side of the lagoon. Sooty Terns (*Sterna fuscata*) were most in evidence and were seen everywhere in flight.

Greater Frigate Birds *Fregata minor*:

We found about twenty nestlings of various ages, each sitting on a loose nest of twigs about six feet from the ground and being fed, mainly with squid, by hard working parents of both sexes.

Red Tailed Tropic Birds *Phaethon rubricauda*:

About twelve nestlings at various stages were seen on the sand, under bushes; adults were also present but no nests were evident.

Red Footed Boobies *Sula sula*:

There were large numbers of nestlings on neat nests of loose twigs, six to twelve feet from the ground. Immature birds in both the intermediate and dark phase were seen, but no white adults.

Brown Boobies *Sula leucogaster*:

A few adults were seen and one nestling in a large nest of leaves and sticks at the top of the beach. There were also some immature birds.

Common and White-capped Noddies *Anous stolidus* and *A. minutus*:

White Terns *Gygis alba*:

These three species had been seen there and are said to nest locally.

Asiatic Whimbrels *Numenius variegatus*:

Bar Tailed Godwits *Limosa lapponica*:

Both these species were seen in a group of about twenty, apparently looking for food on a stretch of very hot, bare, dark coral. On approaching Suvarov we saw a flight of birds which resembled these flying overhead and going west.

Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis dominica*:

Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*:

A few of these birds were seen.

Long Tailed Cuckoo *Eudynamis taitensis*:

We only heard this bird in a densely wooded part of the motu, but Mr Neale has seen it and is sure that he has identified it correctly. A "Koekoea" was described to us on Tongareva, and would seem to be the same bird, but we did not see it.

Lesser Frigate Birds *Fregata ariel*:

On the leeward side of the lagoon on a very open bit of reef covered with scrubby growth and incredibly hot and dry, we saw hundreds of nestlings of all sizes, also young and adults. The nests were almost all on the ground or on low shrubs a few inches up. They were tiny nests of sticks, cemented together, and each accommodating a chick, sitting upright and tall and just out of pecking distance of its neighbour, clacking their beaks at us like castanets. In a few instances adults of both sexes were still sitting on newly hatched young but we did not see any eggs. The chicks were being fed squid by the parents.

Sooty Terns *Sterna fuscata*:

A colony of chicks, either just flying or just about to do so, was found. Many old unhatched eggs were lying around.

Red Footed Boobies *Sula sula*:

Present in great numbers, some birds sitting and at every age from nestlings to newly flying. White phase adults were noted.

Blue Reef Heron *Egretta sacra*:

An adult bird was seen and Mr Neale told us he had once seen what he took to be the nest and eggs of this Heron.

We would like to add that we are very indebted to Mrs Sylvia Reed for help and advice on the presentation of these notes.

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R.D. 1,

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