

BIRDS OF THE SOLANDER ISLANDS

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ABSTRACT

Bird observations made during seven days (26-28 January 1973, 30 January-3 February 1973) spent on the Solander Islands are recorded. Twenty-four species were found on the Solanders including 5 species not previously recorded there.

INTRODUCTION

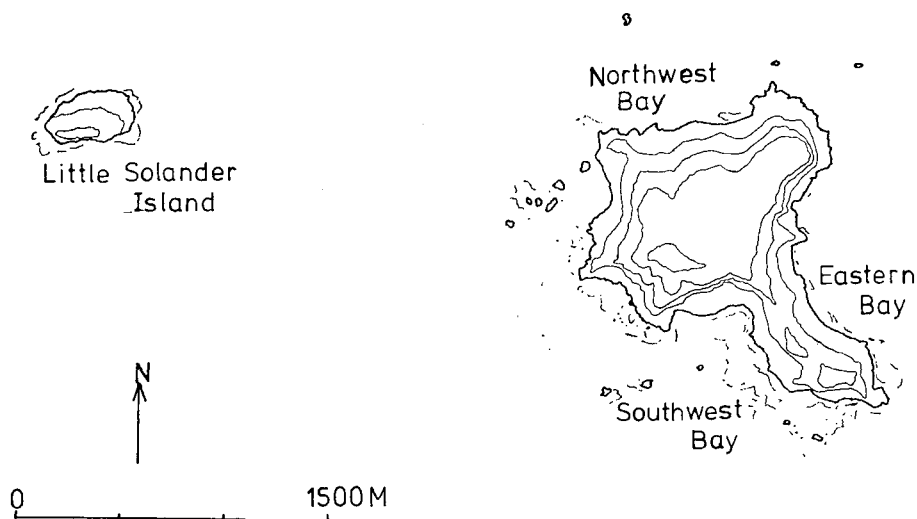
The Solander Islands lie in the western entrance to Foveaux Strait, some 52 km south of Puysegur Point and 63 km west of Stewart Island. Since their discovery by Captain Cook on 11 March 1770 they have had a well-deserved reputation for inhospitality and visitors have been infrequent. Sealers worked the Solanders in the early 1800's and more recently in 1946. During the last few years crayfishermen have fished around the islands.

The Solander Islands are erosional remnants of a former volcano. The larger of the two islands, Big Solander, is roughly triangular, 335 m high, and slopes steeply from a fairly flat top. The shoreline consists of boulder beaches which are occupied by several thousand fur seals (*Arctocephalus forsteri*). The Eastern Bay, where most visitors have landed, has scrubby bush, mainly *Olearia* sp., *Blechnum* fern and *Hebe elliptica*, clinging to the near-vertical slopes. At the gently sloping bases of these cliffs are small areas of scrub greatly disturbed by seals. Northwest and Southwest Bays have fern and tussock slopes, with scrub only in the valleys well above sea level, and provide easier access to the top of the island. Little Solander Island, about 180 m high, has a steep coastline but is almost rounded on top. The vegetation is similar to that on the western slopes of the main island.

Scientific visits have been infrequent. Mr E. F. Stead spent an hour ashore in 1933, and Dr (now Sir Robert) Falla landed on 9 December 1947 with Dr R. C. Murphy and others, and on 20 July 1948 he made short visits to both islands. Dr H. J. Harrington and Dr B. L. Wood of the New Zealand Geological Survey briefly visited the main island on 16 February 1957.

Falla (1948) recorded the birds seen on his visits and Harrington and Wood (1958) described the geology of the islands and included a map showing topographical features, reprinted in part here.

Although I spent a total of seven days at the Solanders the prime aim of this visit was a study of the Fur Seal population, leaving less time than desired for ornithological activities. I left Halfmoon Bay, Stewart Island, on 25 January 1973 on F.V. *Helena* (skipper Owen Eriksson), arrived at the Solanders in stormy conditions and was unable to go ashore until the next day. I spent two nights



SOLANDER ISLANDS

FIGURE 1 — Map of the Solander Islands showing localities mentioned in the text. Contours at 250 foot intervals. Based on a geological map by Harrington and Wood (1958).

camped at Eastern Bay and left the island on 28 January, but due to heavy seas was unable to take off equipment. On 30 January I returned to the Solanders, again on the *Helena*, and spent that day circumnavigating both islands before going ashore at Eastern Bay that evening. On 31 January I was landed at Southwest Bay and returned to camp over the razorback ridge (150 m high) separating this from Eastern Bay. I spent 1-2 February at Eastern Bay and was uplifted on 3 February and returned to Halfmoon Bay.

RECORDS

Southern Blue Penguin (*Eudyptula m. minor*)

This species has not been seen previously but on this trip I collected bones from the cave at Eastern Bay.

Fiordland Crested Penguin (*Eudyptes p. pachyrhynchus*)

Fiordland Crested Penguins were found moulting along the boulder beaches in both Eastern and Southwest Bays and at least 20 were in the cave at Eastern Bay. Birds were found at all stages of moult, but in most moult appeared to be well advanced. No chicks were seen.

Snares Crested Penguin (*Eudyptes p. atratus*)

One was seen by Falla in December 1947 and I saw one in premoult fat at Southwest Bay on 31 January 1973.

Bullers Mollymawk (*Diomedea bulleri*)

Bullers Mollymawks were found nesting over most of both islands from 15 m to at least 150 m above sea level. At Eastern Bay nests were on small ledges well hidden in the scrub. On Southwest Bay and Little Solander Island nesting birds were more conspicuous on the steep fern and tussock slopes. Nests were scattered except on the razorback ridge between Eastern and Southwest Bays where nests were very close together.

Many birds were incubating eggs, but on some nests a lone bird was present while at others pairs were courting. Most of the eggs were still clean and tinged with pink, and the adults were easily disturbed, indicating the eggs were recently laid. Thus, it appears that egg laying occurs here at about the same time as at the Snares Islands where eggs are laid in January-February. Bullers Mollymawks at the Chatham Islands lay their eggs in October-November (Falla *et al.* 1970).

Early in the evening of 26 January a group of about 15 Bullers Mollymawks with several Southern Blackbacked Gulls, Australian Gannets, White-fronted Terns and a single Sooty Shearwater were seen over a school of silvery herring-like fish. The mollymawks were making shallow dives and were the only birds actually seen taking fish.

Other Albatrosses

A few Shy (*Diomedea c. cauta*) and Salvins (*D. c. salvini*) Mollymawks were seen offshore when approaching or leaving the Solanders, and a lone Wandering (*D. exulans*) or Royal (*D. epomophora*) Albatross was seen on 28 January 1973.

Giant Petrel (*Macronectes giganteus*)

Giant Petrels were seen offshore in small numbers and three were seen on a pebble beach at Southwest Bay when I went ashore there at 0700 hr on 31 January. The open tussock slopes of the Southwest and Northwest Bays and Little Solander Island appear suitable for this species to nest. However, I saw no signs of breeding on the parts of Southwest Bay I visited.

Snares Cape Pigeon (*Daption capensis australis*)

Falla (1948) saw adult Cape Pigeons cruising along the cliffs of Little Solander Island in December 1947 and suggested this species may breed there. On 30 January 1973 I spent over an hour close to Little Solander Island inspecting the cliffs but did not see any sign of these birds ashore. However, at the Snares Islands, little adult activity was observed on the breeding grounds in late January 1971 and the chances of observing chicks on nests from a boat are slight. The western and southern cliffs of Little Solander Island have numerous ledges and crevices similar to those used by Cape Pigeons at the Snares. These cliffs appear suitable for Cape Pigeons to nest on and it is hoped subsequent parties will be able to confirm this. Cape Pigeons were seen offshore on most days but never in large numbers.

Prions

No prions were seen on this visit, but Fairy Prion (*Pachyptila turtur*) bones and other prion bones were collected from the cave at Eastern Bay. Falla observed Broad-billed Prions (*P. v. vittata*) offshore on 9 July 1948 and found Fairy Prion bones in skua or hawk middens on Little Solander Island.

Sooty Shearwater (*Puffinus griseus*)

Up to several hundred Sooty Shearwaters were seen offshore most mornings and evenings, and a few birds heard overhead just after dusk. Burrows were found scattered throughout the gently sloping scrub at Eastern Bay, particularly under fern bases. In one burrow that I inspected on 26 January a chick and adult were heard within it and fresh eggshell was found.

Subantarctic Little Shearwater (*Puffinus assimilis elegans*)

On Falla's visit a possible sighting of a Subantarctic Little Shearwater was made on 11 December 1947 and skeletal material collected. I collected further skeletal material on the Eastern Bay boulder beach.

Mottled Petrel (*Pterodroma inexpectata*?)

Pterodroma petrels were heard overhead each night about 2200 hours. The calls heard were "ti ti ti", often prefixed by "graaw", and sometimes followed by a more hysterical "tee tee tee". This bird is most likely to be the Mottled Petrel which breeds nearby on some of the islands around Stewart Island, or could less likely be Cooks Petrel (*P. cooki*) which is a much rarer bird found breeding only on Little Barrier, Great Barrier and Codfish Islands (OSNZ 1970).

Southern Diving Petrel (*Pelecanoides urinatrix chathamensis*)

Skeletal material was found at Southwest Bay and in the cave at Eastern Bay but no live birds were seen. Falla found this to be the principal burrowing petrel on Little Solander Island in 1948.

Australian Gannet (*Sula bassana serrator*)

Falla confirmed the presence of breeding Australian Gannets on Little Solander Island in 1948 when he found a small colony of about 20 nests in a small gully. I was unable to land on this island, but from the boat I located two groups of nesting gannets. One group of 19 or 20 birds (18 nests) was on a steeply sloping rock face about 10 m above sea level, and the second group of 20-30 birds in a clearing on an exposed ridge about 70 m above sea level. The nests of the lower group consisted of crude piles of dried tussock. Most nests were in two loose groups spread along a ledge on the rock slope, and at one end gannets nested alongside Buller's Mollymawks. The top group could not be accurately counted as it appeared to extend down into a gully. This is probably the colony that Falla found. The gannet population of Little Solander Island appears to have at least doubled since 1948. Gannets were commonly seen offshore and they are notable seabirds in Southern Fiordland.

Blue Shag (*Stictocarbo punctatus steadi*)

The only shags I saw were two Blue Shags on the north-eastern point of Big Solander Island on 26 January 1973.

Stewart Island Weka (*Gallirallus australis scotti*)

The Stewart Island Weka was introduced to Big Solander Island by sealers for food. It is now common, but I saw many birds that were very thin though apparently healthy. On 1 February a possible fledgling was seen following an adult, and next day the "hunched-up, feathers ruffled" display typical of wekas was observed.

Variable Oystercatcher (*Haematopus unicolor*)

Several pairs were seen at Eastern Bay and 5-6 birds on the Southwest Bay boulder beach, where they may breed. The piping display was observed on 1 February. This is a new Solander Island record.

Southern Black-backed Gull (*Larus dominicanus*)

This species is common at the Solanders but the only sign of breeding was two chicks seen at Southwest Bay on 30 January. One was downy with the primaries just appearing and the other chick was almost fully fledged.

Red-billed Gull (*Larus novaehollandiae scopulinus*)

Although it appears to be less numerous than the Black-backed Gull, three small Red-billed Gull colonies were found along Eastern Bay. These colonies were on areas of broken-down cliffs above the seal colony. Several nearly-fledged young were seen.

White-fronted Tern (*Sterna striata*)

They were commonly seen offshore and on coastal rocks in flocks of up to 26. Several young of the current season were observed but no nests were found.

Yellow-crowned Parakeet (*Cyanoramphus a. auriceps*)

Parakeets were observed frequently and appeared to be *auriceps* as reported by Falla (1948).

Hedge Sparrow (*Prunella modularis occidentalis*)

Hedge Sparrows were uncommon and I made only one definite sighting.

Grey Warbler (*Gerygone i. igata*)

One of the most impressive features of the Solander Island bird life was the abundance of Grey Warblers. On some days the songs of these and Bellbirds were almost unending.

Yellow-breasted Tit (*Petroica m. macrocephala*)

Tits were seen in all the areas of scrub that I visited.

Blackbird (*Turdus m. merula*)

This species is uncommon, and like most island Blackbirds they are very shy.

Bellbird (*Anthornis m. melanura*)

These birds were very common at Eastern Bay.

DISCUSSION

Species reported by Falla (1948) and not seen on my visit are Subantarctic Little Shearwater, prions, Reef Heron (*Egretta s. sacra*), Australasian Harrier (*Circus approximans gouldi*), Southern Skua (*Stercorarius skua lonnbergi*), Fantail (*Rhipidura f. fuliginosa*), and Silvereye (*Zosterops l. lateralis*). Of these I found skeletal material of prions and Subantarctic Little Shearwater, and presumably the heron and hawk were transitory. The apparent absence of Southern Skua, Fantails and Silvereyes is surprising although Falla indicates none of these was common.

Excluding birds seen offshore, the new species recorded on my visit are Southern Blue Penguin (skeletal material only), Giant Petrel, a possible record of the Mottled Petrel, Blue Shag and Variable Oystercatcher. Of these the Mottled Petrel and the Variable Oystercatcher are probably breeding at the Solanders.

It would be interesting to visit the tussock slopes of the western bays of Big Solander Island, and from there gain access to the top of the Island. These areas are as yet virtually unknown. There are bird bones washed into the cave at Eastern Bay and further collecting here could reveal information on the former fauna. Little Solander has only been visited briefly by Falla and must have species as yet unrecorded at the Solanders.

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