

## SHORT NOTES

### STOAT PREDATION AT A RED-BILLED GULL COLONY, KAIKOURA

On 5 December 1975, while watching part of the Red-billed Gull colony at Sugarloaf on the Kaikoura Peninsula, I observed a stoat taking eggs from the south-west end of the colony. I arrived at the colony at 1130 hrs (NZST). Nothing unusual was seen until just after 1700 hrs (NZST), when an adult stoat was seen about 12m away in the colony with a gull egg.

There were approximately 30 nests in the colony. Seven of these contained eggs and the remainder were empty. Only two large chicks were present in this area. A family of stoats was living in the area, and the high incidence of empty nests had been attributed in part to stoat predation, rather than reproductive failure.

The egg was too big for the stoat to hold entirely in its mouth. The animal carried the egg by sinking its teeth into the shell at the pointed end, and moving forwards with the egg tucked between the forelimbs. It was difficult to determine whether the forelimbs were used to assist in carrying the egg. Most egg shells examined subsequently at stoat dens had four neat puncture marks at the pointed end of the shell where the canine teeth had penetrated.

The animal made its way down from the colony, and at the base of the rock on which the colony was sited, in an area of open shade, the stoat set about eating the contents of the egg. Having eaten the egg, it returned to the colony, pausing to lick up yolk which it had spilt on the rocks when the egg was carried down. The stoat darted into the colony and reappeared a few seconds later with another egg, which was eaten under a small boulder 2-3m outside the colony. After finishing the egg, the stoat reached up the rock and licked up some yolk before it finally disappeared from view, presumably into the nearest cover, an African boxthorn thicket about 10m from the colony. The animal was at the colony approximately four minutes.

The stoat's presence in the colony caused only localised disturbance, about ten gulls immediately adjacent to the stoat appeared to react to its presence. Some called raucously from the ground, while others hovered less than 0.7m overhead. On one occasion the stoat leapt at a gull hovering directly above.

At no time did the stoat appear to notice me standing in full view. However, while eating the eggs it was continually alert to all that was going on around it and I think only failed to notice me because strong gusts of wind which shook distant vegetation, constantly distracted the animal's attention.

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