

## GREY PHALAROPE IN THE BAY OF PLENTY

By B. BROWN and P. C. M, LATHAM

On the morning of 19 June 1977, PCML saw an unusual bird swimming at the edge of the lagoon adjacent to the Kaituna River mouth, central Bay of Plenty coast, North Island. After he had drawn it to the attention of BB an approach was made to within 8m where we were able to observe it through 8 x 30 binoculars in excellent light. We were later joined by A. J. Palliser with a 20 x telescope. On a subsequent visit that afternoon PCML, finding the bird exceptionally tame or almost indifferent to his presence, approached to within 4m. The bird was watched almost continuously from 1930 to 1600 hours, with a further three hours (PCML) on 25 June.

*Body size:* About that of a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*Calidris acuminata*), though the legs were noticeably shorter.

*Crown:* Dark grey, streaked with buff, tapering at the nape to form a narrow line ending on the mantle, and coming forward through the forehead to join a dark grey patch at the base of the bill.

*Forehead:* Dark.

*Superciliary:* Broadly white.

*Lores:* Dark from base of bill through lores continuing faintly to well behind the eye.

*Ear coverts:* White.

*Chin and upper throat:* Dark.

*Lower throat, lower central breast and underparts:* Whitish with light buff-chestnut mottling.

*Neck, upper breast, sides of breast, sides, flanks and undertail coverts:* Pinkish chestnut, with a mauvy-grey wash which showed particularly strongly below the carpal joint; some white mottling present, with a small white patch beside each carpal joint and two irregular white patches between flanks and tail.

*Upper surfaces:* Feathers blackish brown with buff edging.

*Tail and uppertail coverts:* Black.

*Rump:* White, with central dark line.

*Bill:* Shorter than *C. acuminata*, yellow from base to a little over half its length, then black to the tip; nostrils noticeably large and black on the yellow.

*Legs:* Grey, feet not well seen.

In flight a pronounced white wing bar showed on the dark upper wing surface; underwing uniformly pale except for dusky leading edge and tip. When wings were folded, white edges on the secondaries showed plainly.



FIGURE 1 — Grey Phalarope, Bay of Plenty, 22 June 1977

Photo: R. B. Goffin

In the six-day interval between the initial and the final sightings PCML found that the pinkish-chestnut of neck, upper breast, sides of breast, sides, flanks and undertail coverts had deepened to a reddish-chestnut and that much of the white mottling had gone. However, the white spots beside each carpal joint and the irregular white patches on flanks remained.

From this description it is clear that the bird was a Grey Phalarope (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) in advanced pre-nuptial moult.

Witherby *et al.* (1940) described both sexes in winter as having sides of breast blue-grey. The mauvy-grey wash, as described, suggests to us a bird not quite in full breeding plumage. The breeding season, according to Witherby, is in late June and early July in Spitzbergen; about ten days later in Siberia. Therefore, by late June birds could be expected to be in full breeding plumage or very close to it.

Furthermore, the colouring of this bird suggested that of an adult male. Comparison of PCML's colour photographs with P. Harrison's (1969: 963) colour photograph of a male shows a remarkably close similarity, mainly because of the dark forehead, white mottling of the underparts, the restricted white developing on the sides of the face, the crown and nape dusky streaked with buff, bill half black half yellow and the generally subdued colouring of the plumage.

According to Witherby, the adult female in (northern) summer has "crown and nape black . . . . centre of nape bluish mouse-grey . . . . lores and chin sooty black . . . . on sides of face surrounding eye a large white patch; sides of neck auburn shading into chestnut-brown; remaining under-parts chestnut-brown . . . . Bill chrome yellow, tip black." The adult male in (northern) summer is "markedly duller than female, especially on head . . . . has crown and nape streaked black and buff, lores and chin more dusky, with less and dingier white on sides of face . . . . white patch round eye much smaller and in some confined to eye-stripe . . . . remaining under-parts as female but more or less intermixed with white feathers, some suffused with chestnut-brown at tip . . . . Bill base yellow, rest black." Juvenile male and female: "upper-parts resemble adult male in summer but forehead light buff or white. Bill grey-brown shaded to black tip."

In (northern) winter the Grey Phalarope is mid-grey above, white below and on forehead and crown, with darkish patches on rear of the crown and around and behind the eye, and has blackish-brown wings.

The Grey Phalarope, or Red Phalarope as it is called in the Americas, breeds in Arctic North America, Greenland, Iceland, Spitzbergen, Novaya Zemlya and Arctic Siberia from the Taimyr Peninsula eastward to the coast of Anadyrland. Its winter distribution is entirely oceanic and is not fully known; outlined by Palmer (*in* Stout 1976: 263) as "off the Aleutians, Baja California (Mexico), and areas from there south to central Chile; in Atlantic apparently off Argentina, also off bulge of western Africa and south to the Cape. Also somewhere within or near the south China Sea." Winter records of birds on land are sparse. In New Zealand, only three Grey Phalaropes have been recorded previously: all females, collected from Waimate South (June 1883), Lake Ellesmere (1925) and Hastings (July 1934) (OSNZ 1970). The Bay of Plenty bird is, therefore, the first male recorded in New Zealand.

According to Falla (1936: 13), phalaropes are entirely accidental in New Zealand and there is no evidence that their wintering range includes the New Zealand region, for there have been no records in the southern summer. The sightings of a Red-necked Phalarope (*P. lobatus*) at Washdyke Lagoon on 19 March 1961 (Crockett 1961) in non-breeding plumage modifies this view slightly but the occurrence of phalaropes remains accidental. The only Australian record of a Grey Phalarope

is of a bird in Victoria in 1976. This bird, in complete non-breeding plumage, was found on 22 February 1976 at Lake Woorinen, 350 km inland (Smith 1976).

We had been unable to find a reference in the literature to the white patch beside the carpal joint, which shows plainly in PCML's colour photographs and in the colour photographs of a male Grey Phalarope in breeding plumage (*in* Harrison, 1969). However, Smith (1976), describing the only Australian record of a bird in winter plumage, said "Underparts: Pure white from chin and sides of neck to undertail coverts. Feathers of underparts along sides and flanks extending up to enclose the edge of the folded wing." His Plate 47 shows the mark clearly.

For all three species of phalarope Harrison (1969) remarked — "There is a reversal of the normal sexual relationship, the female being the larger of the two with the brightest summer plumage. It is the female which initiates courtship and the male which incubates the eggs and rears the young." Food includes crustaceans, molluscs, insects, small jellyfish, algae and moss, "and it is said to forage in the wake of whales." Witherby *et al.* stated that L. Kumlien described this species as regularly alighting on backs of whales resting at surface, in search of parasites.

When discovered, our bird was swimming buoyantly with head erect, and spinning on the water with a pirouetting movement. "... the plumage is dense and carries a cushion of trapped air ... and enables the bird to swim high and buoyantly in the water so that it can pirouette characteristically round and round when feeding" (Harrison 1969). For so small a bird it swam strongly.

It fed in several ways when swimming; plunging the head below the surface; upending and spinning. The latter movement was frequently employed to get at insects on the surface but on occasion seemed to be used to stir up food particles from below. Much of the bird's observed feeding time was spent wading in the *Spirogyra*-like weed which chokes a great deal of this shallow lagoon. Here it fed on the flies which abounded there, in an unhurried though purposeful way, not running but never still, a quick stab here and another there. "... darting this way and that as it snaps at gnats and flies, its favourite food on land. ..." (Coward 1953).

Once, while swimming, the bird was seen to gulp convulsively six or seven times in quick succession. The head was erect, not arched as though to regurgitate. It was also seen to adopt a "crouching" position while on the water, with head and neck held low. Flattening itself to the surface, with head held first on one side and then the other, it gave the impression that this was a posture assumed when threatened from above, though it could have been peering intently into the water.

When washing, the partly opened wings were fluttered to throw water over the body. The head and breast were forcibly bobbed under the water a number of times in quick succession.

When it approached a feeding Pied Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*) too closely the phalarope was chased and finally put to flight. No flights of more than 30 m were observed and the bird was not heard to call.

It is interesting to note that the feet of phalaropes are partly webbed and partly lobed. This was noticeable in the bird to the extent that it had a flat-footed appearance, somewhat like a gull.

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## SHORT NOTE

### SWALLOWS AT SEA TO THE NORTH OF NEW ZEALAND

On 22 March 1978, at 1300 hours when in position 30°21'S 176°55'E (which is some 240 km (150 miles) north-east of Cape Brett) two Welcome Swallows (*Hirundo neoxena*) were seen flying about the ship. By 1600 hours the same day there were five swallows on board sitting on rails and pipes. Some, if not all, of these birds were still on board when *Marama* arrived at Auckland the following morning.

On 25 March 1978, at 1400 hours when in position 32°07'S 175°32'E (about 260 km (160 miles) north-eastward of North Cape), one Welcome Swallow flew about the ship for about twenty minutes. It did not land on board and was not seen subsequently.

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