

## ASIATIC WHIMBREL AT PETONE.

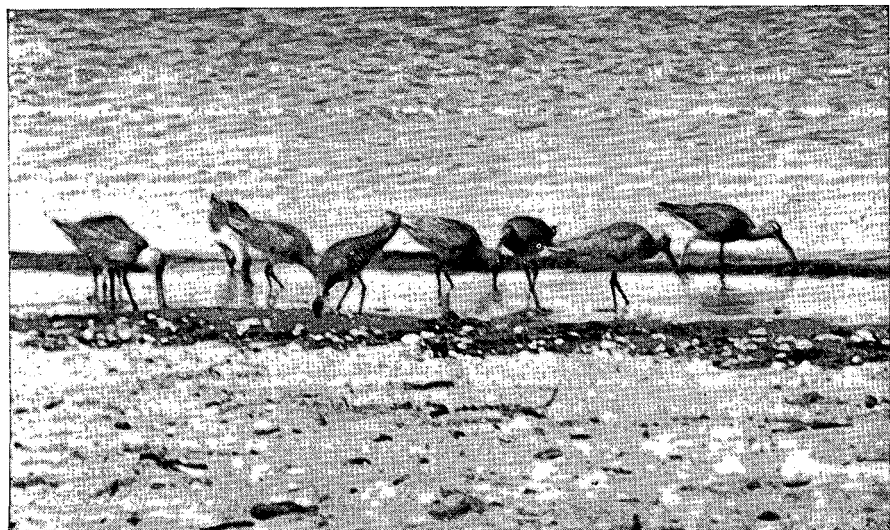
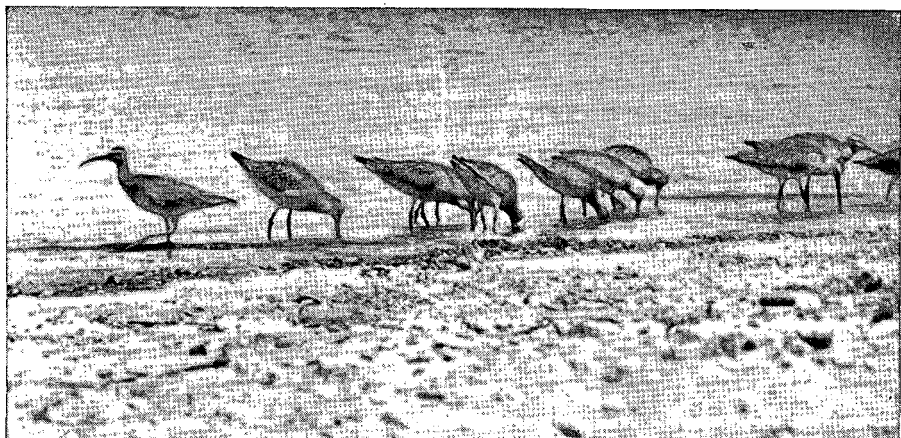
By C. A. Fleming, Wellington.

Wellington has no extensive tidal flats to attract vast flocks of migrant waders to spend the summer, but, as noted by Stidolph (N.Z. Bird Notes, vol. 3, No. 5, p. 126) the west coast of the province lies on at least a subsidiary migration route, so that birds on passage are recorded from time to time chiefly during the southward movement in late spring. The northern shore of Port Nicholson, now closely populated and somewhat industrialised, is no longer so suitable a habitat for migrant waders as it was in the early days of European settlement. In the spring of 1949, however, a small party of migrants, consisting of Pacific bar-tailed godwit (*Limosa lapponica*) and an Asiatic whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus variegatus*) spent several days on Petone Beach before passing on to more suitable feeding grounds.

The whimbrel was first seen on October 22 and last seen on October 31, 1949. The godwit numbered seven on October 22 and 23, twelve on October 29 and 30, and had dropped to nine on the 31st, when last seen. At different times the birds were observed by D. H. Brathwaite, T. Cockcroft, J. M. Cunningham, R. A. Falla, R. R. Hutton, and the writer. When first seen (by C.A.F.) the whimbrel was in flight, with black-backed gulls (*Larus dominicanus*), near the end of Tory Street. It settled repeatedly on the inter-tidal sand flats but flew on disturbance and circled over Petone. Later, seven godwit were located near the mouth of Korokoro Stream. On October 23 the whimbrel was feeding, at first high on the dry sand, later on the wet sand, near to, but not associating with seven godwit, about 200 yards east of Korokoro Stream (T.C. and J.M.C.). Disturbed by people, dogs and black-backed gulls, it flew erratically at about 100 feet over Petone town, calling almost incessantly, and eventually disappeared. During the following week, Wellington experienced a mild southerly, but the wind had returned to the north before October 29, when Dr. R. A. Falla found the whimbrel still at Petone, associating with 12 godwit. On October 30, at high tide, the whimbrel accompanied 12 godwit, feeding on dry sand and at the water's edge. Much disturbance kept the birds moving between Korokoro Stream and Petone wharf. The godwit fed voraciously and constantly, plunging their bills "to the hilt," and the whimbrel dabbled less enthusiastically. In contrast with its previous noisy behaviour, the whimbrel was silent all morning, and the godwit uttered merely subdued chattering as they fed, or just as they rose into the air when flushed. On October 31, D.H.B. and R.R.H. found the whimbrel, with nine godwit, still on the Petone foreshore, but they were not seen again.

When first observed, the whimbrel tended to be solitary and noisy, circling widely when flushed, and uttering a loud and arresting call on D (eight "white notes" above middle C), repeated 7 or 8 times, which justified the name of "seven-whistler," but I would not consider any of the calls "sweetly rippling," "a rippling trill," or "a pretty trilling call" as they have sometimes been described. Later in its stay, the whimbrel adopted the party of godwit, but usually kept to one side of them, was more nervous in behaviour, fed less assiduously, and always led the flock in flight.

The field characters of the whimbrel have been discussed in recent numbers of "N.Z. Bird Notes," (Sibson, Stidolph, vol. 2, No. 2; McKenzie, vol. 3, No. 2). The Wellington bird appeared heavier and longer-winged than godwit in the air, but slimmer than godwit on the ground. Its alert nervousness always gave it height above the feeding godwit. Its darker colour, particularly on its barred flanks and streaked chest, was evident both in flight and on the ground; the legs were bluish grey and appeared paler than godwits' in sunlight; the bill dark, with a light fleshy-orange base to the mandible. When flying side on, the dorsal colour appeared almost uniform, so that at first I thought the bird was the Hudsonian whimbrel (*N. p. hudsonicus*), but Cunningham, who had



Photos: C. A. Fleming.

ASIATIC WHIMBREL and BAR-TAILED GODWIT, Petone Beach.

recently observed whimbrels at Lord Howe Island, was able to see the diagnostic pale rump of *variegatus* when the bird flew away from him, and this character was amply confirmed on October 30.

Northern Hemisphere waders on migration in New Zealand usually feed or rest on broad sand and mudflats or banks, offering little cover to the photographer. The whimbrel has not previously been caught by a New Zealand camera, and even the godwit, commonest of migrant waders, has seldom, if ever, been photographed feeding naturally. The accompanying pictures were taken at Petone on October 30 with an "Exakta," fitted with 6-inch lens.

## NORTH ISLAND THRUSH.

By W. P. Mead, Wanganui.

The writer spent four days, March 14 to 17, 1950, on the Wanganui River with a survey party. The Maori captain of the boat, Andrew Anderson, has been 40 years on the river, and is a man with a real love of the native birds and bush. When in conversation with him regarding birds that we might see on the trip, I learned that a bird he called the "toatoa," apparently the native thrush, was present in the bush alongside the river. The bird was known also to Mr. R. Oxley, a younger Maori member of the party, educated at Te Aute College, to whom I am indebted for information on the correct spelling and usage of the Maori names for the thrush, he having had these confirmed by an elderly Maori of Koroniti.

Most of the following information was given me by Anderson before we heard and saw the bird, but information given later by both men is included. The common name of the North Island thrush, along the river, is "toatoa," but Anderson had been told by his elder brother that its correct name is "tiutiu," or tiutiukata." The addition of the word "kata" to "tiutiu" is used when it is desired to better describe the bird (just as we use "thrush" or, more particularly, "song thrush," for the introduced bird). Anderson first noticed the toatoa along the reaches of the river below Retaruke about 12 or 14 years ago, that is, not long before the tourist service on that part of the river was discontinued owing to the war. He described it as a brown bird the size of the introduced thrush, or slightly larger, inquisitive and tame, yet in a way shy. It would often appear when a wild pig was killed, but on noticing that it had been observed, would fly away, frequently returning and flying past for one more look before going away altogether. It feeds on the ground as well as on the trees, sings somewhat like the introduced thrush, and has a way of turning its head to one side, listening, then to the other side and listening again. It appears to be increasing in numbers and extending its range alongside the river.

The noise of the boat's engine prevented us from hearing bird calls, but on March 15, near Opuraha, when we were alongside the bank with the engine idling (we were picking up a pig which had been shot from the boat) I heard a call, new to me, from a tree not 20 feet away, which Anderson said, before I had time to question him about it, was the call of the toatoa. We could not see the bird and as we were running late, could not wait on the chance of finding it. The call heard on this occasion was the first two phrases of the thrush's song as I heard it later, on March 17. There was a good deal of noise and I could not hear more.

We tied up for the night at Te Auroa. Soon after daylight on March 16, during the bustle of getting ready for an early start, we heard more calls, double whistles and chirping calls, which Anderson said were from the toatoa. There seemed to be two or more of the birds only a chain or two away in the bush, but again there was no time to investigate.

Returning downstream, after reaching Retaruke, we pulled in after dark that night above Otaahua. On the morning of March 17 the song of the toatoa was heard again. There was one singing across the river,