

BIRD NOTES FROM LITTLE BARRIER.

By Elliot Watson Dawson, Christchurch.

During November and December of 1949 I spent several weeks on that "tapu isle of birds," the "Hauturu" of the old-time Maori, Little Barrier Island. This account of the bird life of the area primarily consists of my own observations together with notes and information supplied to me by Mr. and Mrs. C. H. Parkin, custodians of this ornithological paradise. I wish to express my sincere appreciation of the great help and co-operation given by Mr. and Mrs. Parkin, who spared no effort to help me. I had the added pleasure during my visit of the company of Miss Beatrice Brown, an English ornithologist, of Limpsfield, Surrey. I have to thank Dr. W. R. B. Oliver, Major Buddle and Mr. E. G. Turbott for giving me information pertaining to my trip. Notes on bird observation are:—

Kiwi (*Apteryx australis*).—On my first night on the island I found a small brown kiwi in grass about 15 yards from the back door of the house. On the same night, many kiwis were spotted by torchlight in the orchard, the bull paddock and other grassy areas on the flat. It was a great experience to have kiwis wandering around my tent, sometimes bumping into the sides, sometimes even coming right inside. A noticeable feature was that the feathers were harsh to the touch and were easily shedded. On one or two occasions brown kiwis were found in logs in the forested areas. In general, I found kiwis present from the grass homestead flats through manuka forest into parts of the transition forest in the southern sector of the island. Other traces, in the way of feathers, beak marks in soil, etc., were commonly met with. A large grey-coloured kiwi, found under a log in the transition forest up Te Waikohare Stream, appeared to be either a large spotted kiwi (*Apteryx haastii*) or a most abnormally built and coloured North Island kiwi.

Little Blue Penguin (*Eudyptula minor*).—Not many were seen or heard, except at sea, although there was evidence of numerous nests all round the southern part of the island. A penguin found in a burrow in a gully above the Shag Cliffs had two eggs (16/11/49), while others in East Paddock Gully also had eggs (30/11/49). One family was being noisily raised under the tool shed beside the house, and on 23/11/49, a juvenile still in the downy stage was dead beside the shed. Both young and adult penguins could be heard in the evenings making their way up Te Waikohare Stream from the sea. When we were out at sea, fishing at night, penguins could be heard calling loudly and were often seen. They were seen several times on the crossings to and from the island and seemed common in and around Leigh Cove.

Diving Petrel (*Pelecanoides urinatrix*).—Frequently visible at sea in the cross-waters off Te Titoki Point. On one occasion (8/12/49) when a moderate gale was in progress, large numbers of petrels were seen disporting themselves among the turbulent waters off the Point. Diving petrels and storm petrels were also numerous on the crossing back to Leigh.

White-faced Storm Petrel (*Pelagodroma marina*).—A particularly large group was seen off the entrance to Leigh Cove, 10/12/49.

Flesh-footed Shearwater (*Puffinus carneipes*).—A few seen from the boat on the crossings, in the ratio of about one of these birds to 8/10 fluttering shearwaters.

Fluttering Shearwater (*P. gavia*).—These birds were numerous at sea on the trip to Little Barrier, especially working over kahawai shoals. On the return trip several hundreds were seen over shoals off Leigh Cove.

Grey-faced Petrel (*Pterodroma macroptera*).—None seen.

Black Petrel (*P. parkinsoni*).—One bird was seen at sea during the trip from Leigh. A corpse, found on the Summit Track, had the following measurements: Bill 4.5, tarsus 5, body excl tail 34, span total 63. Four corpses were seen on the Thumb Track on one occasion.

Cook's Petrel (*P. cookii*).—These petrels were commonly seen at sea off the south-west sector of the island and seemed plentiful within a radius of a few miles of the island during crossings, as well as being conspicuous at sea at night. The birds were heard to come in from the sea each evening shortly after dusk, on an average any time between 7.45 p.m. and 8.15 p.m., depending on weather conditions. The most characteristic call was the usual, 'ti-ti-ti' or 'whi-kek-kek' sound; owl-like 'wheet' sounds and a cat-like 'purrrr' were also noted. On stormy or misty nights it must be very difficult for the birds to locate their burrows but it seems that some sort of 'avian radar' must enable them to land with reasonable safety and find their burrows. It appears that many birds strike trees on landing, and when in a dazed or unconscious state, fall easy prey to prowling cats. Many of the dead birds found on the island, I think, were killed finally by cats, after receiving some such previous injury. A count of dead Cook's petrels on the Summit Track (18/11/49) showed 14 fresh corpses (1 with remains of egg), and 13 fairly old corpses. A count on the Thumb Track on the same day showed about 17 (1 with egg). There were also 18 ancient corpses of some unidentified petrel on the Summit Track. A Cook's petrel was found alive at about 1500ft. on the Summit Track, suffering from fatal injuries on the lower part of the back due to a cat's attack. Petrels (presumably *P. cookii*) were heard in deep burrows in a bank just east of the Summit of Little Barrier (Hauturu, 2378ft.). On another occasion (3/12/49) about eight freshly-killed petrels (incl. 1 with egg) were found on the Summit Track. A live bird, found on this track at the same time, had a broken wing and appeared to have struck against some obstacle when landing the previous night. Eight petrels were found dead on the Thumb Track (7/12/49). On one rainy night with very low-lying cloud, the petrels came in very low, starting about 8 p.m. It seemed that all those normally coming in from the eastern side of the island joined those on the west side and the throng of innumerable noisy petrels flying in seemingly only a few feet above my head was an impressive experience.

Pied Shag (*Phalacrocorax varius*).—The colony in the pohutukawa trees on the cliffs on the south-west coast I estimated to contain between 35 and 45 nests. Several gaps in the cliff-line showed where trees had fallen out comparatively recently. Many large trees with a number of nests are now very close to the breaking cliff line and in danger of falling in the near future. There are very few pohutukawas of any size behind those on the cliff line and it seems that before very long the whole colony will migrate and re-establish itself elsewhere. At the time of my visit (from mid-November to mid-December) there were all stages of development visible from young fledglings able to fly but still being fed by parent birds, to various nestling stages and eggs. These fledged young were seen to fly down to the sea to feed and return home only to await the return of a parent bird and stimulate the regurgitation of food by running their beaks up and down the parent bird's throat until a food bolus appeared. The only calls I heard were variations of a gull-like harsh 'kaa' theme, uttered only at long intervals and it seemed mainly when a landing bird approached a sitting bird for any reason.

Gannet (*Morus serrator*).—Gannets were always seen at sea off some part of the island coastline. A favourite area for diving was between Te Titoki Point and Crayfish Rock along the West Landing. On the crossing to the island, 50-60 were seen fishing not far from the boat. In Leigh Cove, another good area for these birds, two gannets were diving within a few feet of the boat; one of these could be clearly seen in its progress under water extended in its streamline diving position. When it broke surface it was carrying a fish 4 to 5 inches long in its beak. It then tossed the fish in the air, caught it and swallowed it head first.

Harrier (*Circus approximans*).—A harrier was seen frequently especially from the Flat, probably the only one in this area at the time.

Brown Quail (*Synoicus ypsilophorus*).—I heard typical quail calls on many occasions from various parts of the Flat, especially from patches of sedge where I flushed a pair twice. The population must be quite small, possibly only a very few pairs.

Caspian Tern (*Hydroprogne caspia*).—These terns were seen singly on the south-west coast of the island on a few occasions. (Miss B. E. Brown fide). I saw four fishing in Leigh Cove on the return trip.

White-fronted Tern (*Sterna striata*).—A number seen in the vicinity of Leigh and some were always fishing off the south-west coast of Little Barrier although I never saw more than eight in a group.

Black-backed Gull (*Larus dominicanus*).—During the whole of my visit I saw only two gulls on the island. Deserted nests at the Pinnacles show that this species is or was breeding.

Red-billed Gull (*L. novaehollandiae*).—Scarce on the coasts of the island although it was more numerous at sea off the island. The largest number I saw at one time on the coast-line was four, while on one occasion at sea I counted 48 working over a fish shoal. These gulls were far more numerous in the vicinity of Leigh Cove.

Pigeon (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*).—Pigeons were frequently seen in kanuka trees on all parts of the Flat and often were seen feeding in the grass paddocks and lawn in front of the house.

Brown Kaka (*Nestor meridionalis*).—Kakas were seen a number of times in all parts of the island in the south-west sector. The largest flock I saw together consisted of 12 birds which flew from Te Waikohare Stream over the house to roost in the pohutukawa trees on Te Titoki Point. An abnormally coloured kaka was seen up the Waipawa Stream. This bird was particularly red on the underparts. A large flock of kakas was seen in a large pohutukawa up the Tirikakawa Stream—several varieties of the usual harsh screech were heard and also the bell-like "clong" uttered when annoyed or angry.

Red-fronted Parakeet (*Cyanoramphus novaeseelandiae*).—Commonly seen in all parts of the island visited. Several groups of three or four were seen feeding in cocksfoot in the paddocks round the house. A single parakeet was noted cleaning out a hole, three feet above ground, in a kanuka tree in the East Paddock.

Yellow-fronted Parakeet (*C. auriceps*).—I saw a definite yellow-fronted parakeet in the paddocks near the South-West. Landing on 15/11/49.

Shining Cuckoo (*Chalcites lucidus*).—Heard in every part of the island that I visited. Many frequented the macrocarpa trees near the cowshed.

Long-tailed Cuckoo (*Eudynamis taitensis*).—Calls were always to be heard on the Flat in the early morning and frequently along the various tracks on the island. A few birds were seen high up in kauri trees but not often. These seemed only to be very few cuckoos calling in the gullies but they were heard much more frequently on the various ridges leading to the highest parts of the island.

Morepork (*Ninox novaeseelandiae*).—Moreporks were heard from the Flat nearly every evening and were sometimes seen in the various gullies in the south-west part of the island. A pair in East Paddock Gully had a nest in a puriri tree. Two other nests were found in this gully; one had three eggs and the other contained young. In Te Waikohare, I saw a morepork being mobbed by four whiteheads. East Paddock Gully seems to be favourite morepork territory (v. Sibson, N.Z.B.N., Vol. 3, No. 6, p. 153).

Kingfisher (*Halycon sanctus*).—A few were always to be seen along the shores of the south-west part of the island. Several times in the transition forest and coastal forest, kingfishers were heard. The old nest recorded by Sibson (op. cit.) was being cleaned out for this season. I

saw one nest about 2½ feet above ground in a bank near the Boatshed on the shore. It had faecal pellets, mainly crustacean remains, scattered about below the entrance and contained at least two eggs.

Rifleman (*Acanthisitta chloris*).—Several were seen up Te Waikohare and calls were heard in Waipawa and Tirikakawa. Four birds were seen up the Thumb Track. A nest was located in the limb of an old puriri tree in Te Waikohare, about 30 feet above sloping ground. The nest in this limb had two openings and the parent birds seemed to enter or leave either hole at random. The cavity in the limb must have been quite large since it could accommodate the two parents birds as well as the young. The parents frequently visited the nest, carrying small grubs, flies and small spiders and opiliones, etc. Over one half-hour period, the parents made a trip every three minutes, while in another half-hour period, a few days later, 21 visits were seen.

Grey Warbler (*Pseudogerygone igata*).—A few were noted among the manuka slopes above the east paddocks. Up Te Waikohare, I saw grey warblers nearly every day but never more than two at the one time.

Pied Tit (*Petroica macrocephala toitoi*).—I found the tit, like the warbler, not common. In the whole of my visit, although I heard several up the Thumb Track, etc., I saw only six birds; one male up Te Waikohare Stream and four males and one female on the Shag Track.

North Island Robin (*Miro australis*).—Robins were seen frequently up Te Waikohare, especially in the higher parts, and I saw a single bird up Waipawa. Mrs. Parkin found a nest in the fork of a manuka tree, 2ft. 3in. above ground, on the right-hand branch of Te Waikohare Stream. The nest contained three feathered young (2/12/49) but on 8/12/49 Mrs. Parkin and I found the nest to have only two young. There was no sign of damage to the nest or of the remaining young.

Pied Fantail (*Rhipidura fuliginosa*).—Fantails seemed quite abundant in all parts of the island that I visited, especially in the manuka slopes and transition forest of gullies such as Waipawa, Te Waikohare or Tirikakawa. Birds, usually in pairs, were frequently met with on the Thumb and Summit tracks. I saw a bird sitting in a nest in a manuka thicket above the east paddocks (30/11/49).

Whitehead (*Mohoua ochrocephala albicilla*).—These birds seemed to be everywhere in the bush on the island. A nest with one fresh egg, was found in kanuka in the East Paddock (16/11/49).

Tui (*Prosthemadera novaeseelandia*).—TuIs were everywhere abundant in the forested areas and were especially noticeable on Te Titoki Point, flying from one stand of pohutukawas to another. Mrs. Parkin (who has the most wonderful intuition for finding nests that I have ever seen) found a nest high up a kanuka tree near the Thumb Track. It contained three young. During my visit we found two young tuIs (c. 10 days old) which had fallen out of a high nest in the garden. It was found impossible to replace them in the nest so Mrs. Parkin reared them by feeding them at night with oatmeal (which she first had to thoroughly chew; a grim labour of love!) and during the day time, placing them in an old cage to be fed by the parent tui. This co-operative motherhood carried on for several days until the young were able to fly away with the parent birds.

Bellbird (*Anthornis melanura*).—Bellbirds were not very common but, nevertheless, appeared generally distributed. A nest in a grape vine beside the house, which Mrs. Parkin has kept under observation for three seasons, had three young which were later killed by a rat. The parent birds built another nest under a creeper growing against one of the sheds.

Stitch Bird (*Notiomystis cincta*).—This bird is one of the magnets drawing ornithologists to Little Barrier. There seems to be a travelling population of these birds from one part of the island to another as their food becomes available. I had a very pleasing run of luck in observing

the stitch bird at close quarters. The first bird I saw (19/11/49) was a male, clearly seen from a distance of a few feet, about 10 yards up Te Waikohare from Mr. Parkin's fowl yard. Later, I saw a female a few dozen yards further up the stream. Still higher up, I saw another pair which seemed to be making a round of their territory, passing me regularly every 9 or 10 minutes. Two distinct calls were heard—the usual "tzit-tzit," and also a bell-like whistle, like a cross between the note of a tui and that of a whitehead. After this I saw and/or heard stitch birds each time I went into Te Waikohare. Sometimes I would see a pair or at other times only a single bird fly past me. I never saw more than two pairs together. On 26/11/49, at 6.0 a.m. a male was heard calling very close to the house. There follows a resume of the more important observations that I noted: Two pairs, left branch of Te Waikohare and 1 pair right branch, 20/11/49; 1 pair, lower Te Waikohare, male seen 10 feet away, also an odd female seen nearby, 20/11/49; two pairs, Te Waikohare, 21/11/49; one pair, Te Waikohare, 27/11/49; female, Te Waikohare, 28/11/49; one pair, Waipawa, 2/12/49; female, Summit Track, 3/12/49; male seen 6 to 8 feet away, Thumb Track, 7/12/49; three males, Tirikakawa, 8/12/49. Stitch birds seemed to be cleaning out the nest noted by M. C. Hanna and B. D. Heather (4/1/48) in a large pohutukawa, a chain off the Thumb Track. Miss Brown and I noted another stitch bird call, new to us, in Tirikakawa Stream. As one of us expressed it, it was like a "kingfisher's note sawn in half."

Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*).—I saw two birds near the house and heard another singing in a manuka at the entrance of Waipawa.

Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*).—Five seen in the Bull Paddock but I think they were to be found in more abundance elsewhere.

Yellowhammer (*Emberiza citrinella*).—A pair seen near the South-west Landing, behaving as if nesting (22/11/49). One was seen at the entrance to Waipawa.

Song Thrush (*Turdus ericetorum*).—Breeding.

Blackbird (*T. merula*).—Four nests were found—two with eggs in the orchard, one with three young in pohutukawa in Te Waikohare Stream; one with two young, Thumb Track.

Hedge Sparrow (*Prunella modularis*).—Mrs. Parkin found two nests during my visit.

Lark (*Alauda arvensis*).—A group of five seen in the paddocks near the South-West Landing.

Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*).—A flock of c. 20 was seen flying out to sea from Waipawa mouth. Another group of eight was seen close to the house.

White-backed Magpie (*Gymnorhina hypoleuca*).—A pair of magpies frequented the Flat during my visit. According to Mr. Parkin, they appeared on 1/9/49.

BIRD OBSERVATIONS IN TARARUAS.—In February, 1950, on a solo tramp in the Tararuas, I was on a cleared ridge (about 2000ft. to 2500ft.) when a harrier flew from below just in front of me and little higher than my head. It was immediately followed by a bush hawk which "zoomed" and then dived straight at the harrier. The latter turned over and struck with its right leg, making a loud hissing noise. The bush hawk evaded and made a swift climbing turn (an Immelman) and dived again. The harrier repeated and then flew rapidly into the bush below. The bush hawk flew to the top of a tall dead tree and let out a triumphant shriek. At night, between 10 o'clock and midnight, I was sitting on a tall stump in a clearing a little away from the hut in the moonlight. I was surprised at the number of small flights of birds that passed over in no particular direction, but from and to all points of the compass and flying fairly high. I had no conception what they were. I had come out partly to see if I could spot a bird I had heard