

BIRD NOTES FROM THE BROTHERS ISLAND.

By J. H. Sutherland, The Brothers.

The observations recorded here were made by keepers at The Brothers Lighthouse from August, 1950, to February, 1951. Keepers have an advantage over visiting bird-watchers in that their observations can cover longer periods, but many opportunities of gathering interesting material are necessarily lost while keepers are on duty. These notes are, therefore, not complete.

The Brothers Island is a rocky cone in Cook Strait rising 200 feet from the sea. It is the northernmost rock in a group reaching about a mile S.S.W. from the lighthouse. It is about three miles E.S.E. of the nearest point on Arapawa Island. It has a light soil which grows shore koromiko, taupata, tussock, Maori ice-plant, shore groundsel, salacornia and a few other plants.

In the group of rocky islands there are seven large enough for birds to nest on. Strangely, only three have been chosen—the lighthouse island and two others nearby. The largest island of the group, the Big Brother, seems completely ignored. But since we are confined to our island we cannot be sure that penguins or petrels do not nest there.

Dove petrels, little blue penguins, white-fronted terns and red-billed gulls nest here and it is thought likely that diving petrels may do also. In fine weather we are visited by sparrows, white-eyes and fantails. Harriers, giant petrels, Marlborough shags and black-backed gulls are seen occasionally.

Dove Petrel (*Pachyptila turtur*).—Most nights in the autumn, winter and spring, "doveys," as we call them, are about in great numbers. They sometimes keep us awake, especially on wet nights, when they seem to offer hymns of praise for the rain. We found the first "dovey" egg, 10/8/50. Later, eggs were often found at the mouths of burrows. During and after November, chicks were sometimes found dead, apparently killed by red-billed gulls. One accidentally excavated, 19/1/51, was able to fly away though it was not quite fully fledged. By February, the burrows all appeared to be empty.

Diving Petrel (*Pelecanoides urinatrix*).—Odd divers were seen during the early months of the period, but no notes were taken. On the night of 17/1/51 Mr. Dawbin, of Victoria College, found one dead, and heard several others. After sunset on 2/2/51 I watched many fly in from the sea. Divers hide in the shrubs and it is not easy to make a count, but I think there were about 100 on the island that night. At midnight, 30/2/51, when the weather was calm, cloudy and raining next day, there were as many here as I have yet seen. I put the number at somewhat over 300.

Little Blue Penguin (*Eudyptula minor*).—These birds are more often heard than seen. They get under the buildings and their cries are sometimes like a child sobbing and sometimes like a door swinging on rusty hinges. Wet nights seem to bring them out, but I have no record of the actual dates. While clearing rocks on 6/9/50 keepers disturbed one on a nest. The egg was broken before it was noticed and was fresh.

Red-billed Gull (*Larus novaehollandiae*).—During September and October the gulls began arriving but no note was made of the date when they first appeared in numbers. It was not possible to make a count, but over a thousand nested on these rocks this year. Chicks were first seen 17/12/50. By 23/12/50 the eggs were hatching in numbers. On 29/12/50 a north-westerly storm killed many chicks. By 1/1/51 most of the chicks were hatched. All were flying by 9/2/51. Gulls were seen killing and eating chicks of their own species, and many were found dead, but we think about 500 survived.

White-fronted Tern (*Sterna striata*).—During November, terns arrived and began nesting. The number was considered to be over 500. The first tern chicks were seen 9/1/51. Red-billed gulls were often seen

eating tern eggs and chicks. From one group of 20 tern nests only four chicks survived. We think under 100 chicks survived in all. By 30/1/51 the chicks were all flying and after 9/2/51 the terns had gone.

Marlborough Shag (*Leucocarbo carunculatus*).—One was seen on the rocks 15/12/50, and one on the island well above the water, 28/1/51.

Giant Petrel (*Macronectes giganteus*).—One was seen drifting in the rip, clutching a red-billed gull and eating it, 26/12/50.

Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*).—One was found dead at the foot of the tower after a southerly storm, 17/10/50.

NOTES FROM THE CHRISTCHURCH ESTUARY.—During November and December, 1950 and early January, 1951, I made many journeys to the Christchurch Estuary, accompanied by Mr. B. Jones and Mr. T. Lawson. The birds seen were:—Paradise duck: A pair, 17/11/50, female immature. Grey duck: Often seen at high tide. On 12 and 13/1/51, 30 seen feeding with pied stilts at low tide. Canadian Goose: Heard about 10 p.m., too dark to be seen, 17/11/50. Black Swan: Two seen at rest; only there for short period. Caspian Tern: First seen 4/1/51, resting with 17 red-billed gulls. The following eight days Caspian terns were seen diving for food in all parts of the estuary. White-fronted Tern: Not over 100 on the estuary but to be seen more frequently during winter. Black-billed Gull: Not as common as the red-billed gull; an approximate count showed about 50; more common on Avon River. Red-billed Gull: One of the most common birds on the estuary. An approximate count on 12/1/51 gave about 300. At low tide seen feeding among oyster-catchers and black-backed gulls, and at high tide resting on the Mt. Pleasant jetty and New Brighton sandspit. Black-backed Gull: About 250, 90 being immature. Bar-tailed Godwit: One of the commonest birds on the estuary, numbering about 380 to 400. Banded Dotterel: Occasionally seen in small flocks, near New Brighton sandspit. South Island Pied Oystercatcher: Not common on the estuary in summer; on 12/1/51 about 100. At high tide the oystercatchers cross the spit to Brighton Beach. Pied Stilt: Increased to about 200, about 80 immature. At high tide stilt congregates near the Pleasant Point Domain. Kingfisher: Nest in cliffs at Redcliffs and McCormack's Bay. Spotted Shag: Fly over estuary but never seen feeding. During low tide these birds rest and dry themselves on Shag Rock. Black Shag: Numbers seen diving at high tide and at low tide drying themselves on the sandspit. Reef Heron: Pair seen on estuary since May, 1949. Harrier: One flying across the estuary above a flock of godwits and oystercatchers dived among them and set the entire flock into flight. Pukeko: Seen in the swampy areas around the estuary.—David E. Crockett, Christchurch.

RED-BILLED GULL SNAPPING AT FLIES.—On January 27, 1951, at the Waipapakauri turn-off on the Ninety-mile Beach, I saw a red-billed gull sitting by the smelly remains of a stingray and snapping at the flies that surrounded it in a cloud. After watching it for some minutes I went away to lunch. On returning about an hour later I saw a gull at the same place occupied in the same way as before. If it was the same gull it either had a tremendous capacity for blow-flies or else it was a very poor marksman.—A. H. Watt, Awanui.

MYNAS OUST SPARROWS.—Although mynas are becoming more common in Howick it was only in January, 1951, that they started to be regular inhabitants of our garden. They began their rather unwelcome and noisy stay by throwing out a number of young sparrows from their nests in a tall palm tree. On January 16 I found four fledgling sparrows and one immature bird (probably about a fortnight old) all lying dead underneath the tree. Each bird had a peck on the side of the neck. Even as I picked up the little corpses the two mynas were squawking loudly and flying in and out of the many sparrows' nests in the tree.—Noelle Macdonald, Howick.