WHITE-FACED HERON IN NEW ZEALAND.

By R. H. D. Stidolph, Masterton.

The white-faced heron (**Notophoyx novaehollandiae**) has shown a remarkable increase in numbers in New Zealand during the last ten years.

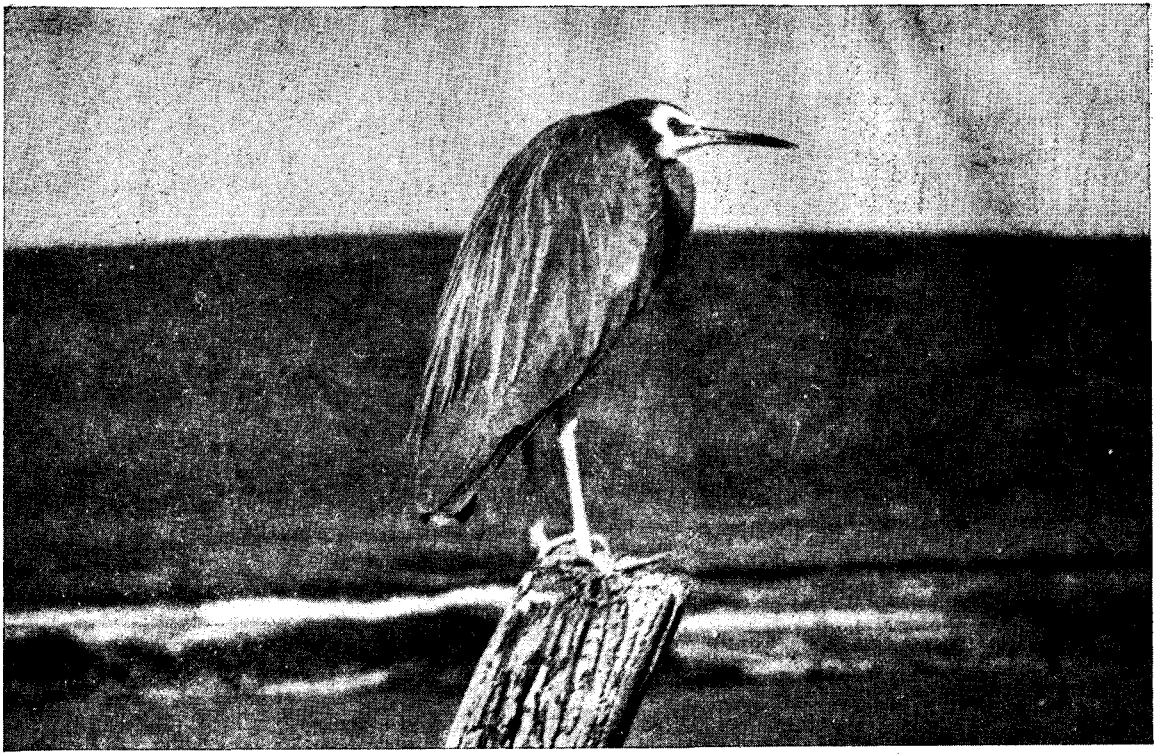
A perusal of the literature relating to this bird indicates its general rarity prior to 1940. Most of the published bird lists up to that year make no mention of it and the few that do, refer to its scarcity. Although there has been some confusion between this species and the coastal-frequenting reef heron (**Demigretta sacra**) under the general name of "blue crane," it is significant that competent bird observers, until 1940 onwards, have few definite records of the white-faced heron, either in the North or the South Island.

Only thirteen records of the occurrence of this heron in the period of European settlement up to the end of 1939 can be traced, these relating to twelve localities and to not more than two birds seen together. It is possible that there are a few additional records, those relating to "a pair" seen on Lake Taupo in October, 1875, and to one at Lake Rotoiti, in October, 1884, which were listed by Buller under the reef heron, but are more likely to have been the white-faced heron. The reef heron is a coastal bird. The records of Reischek of **Ardea novaehollandiae** in the West Coast Sounds are regarded as referable to the reef heron.

From the beginning of 1940 to the end of 1951 there are 43 records in 32 localities, these including as many as 36 birds in one group, with other instances of 20, 12 and 7 birds having been seen together. Thus, we have 13 records over a period of 100 years (1840 to 1939) and 43 records in 12 years (1940-1951). Even making allowance for the larger number of bird observers at the present time, it must be remembered that it is unlikely that a bird of its size would escape detection in earlier days even by those not interested in bird-life. Moreover, there are definite statements that the bird has appeared in certain widely-separated districts only in the last few years.

In a somewhat contradictory reference to the white-faced heron in the "Wellington Evening Press," by Mr. Edward Wakefield, quoted in a footnote by Buller (1888), it is stated that the bird breeds in New Zealand "sometimes," this statement evidently being based on the observations of a resident of Blind Bay (Nelson). No published record of the nest, eggs, or young of this bird in New Zealand is known except that of B. A. Ellis relating to Shag Valley, Otago (1941-1944), though there are good reasons to believe that the bird has bred elsewhere before and after these known instances. Dr. R. A. Falla has stated his belief (1941) that it "seems likely it has been a common breeding species there (referring to Westland) during the whole period of European settlement and before, and that it has somewhat similar winter dispersal habits to those of the white heron. Local observers consider that it has always been a much more plentiful bird than the white heron." If the bird had been as common in Westland (prior to 1940) as the above statement would seem to suggest, it is strange that more birds of this species did not turn up elsewhere in New Zealand during the dispersal period.

Although the white-faced heron and the reef heron sometimes are to be found in the same locality there is no reason why they should be confused. In colour, the white-faced is a much lighter bird than the reef heron, appearing almost white, while the other is almost black, that is, if viewed in a good light. Moreover, the white-faced heron in flight shows the distal portion of the wings much darker than the remainder, whereas in the reef heron, the whole of the wing is the same dark shade. The white-faced, too, is a slimmer looking bird, the reef heron being of a more stocky appearance. The reef heron is essentially a bird of the coast, though it is to be seen sometimes a mile or two up a mud-flanked river. On the other hand, the white-faced may be seen on tidal harbours and estuaries as well as in inland areas, where it frequents swampy land, lagoons and lakes—areas quite beyond the normal habitat of the reef heron. In nesting



WHITE-FACED HERON, at Karaka, Manukau Harbour. Photo: D. A. Urquhart.
One of twelve birds seen there in the winter of 1951.

habits the two birds also differ, the reef heron breeding among rocks on the coast or on islands, and occasionally low down in cavern-like places in trees overhanging the water, whereas the white-faced usually has its nests high up in lofty trees.

There is insufficient evidence to determine whether the greater number of birds now to be seen has resulted from natural increase or from an influx of birds from Australia, though it appears that there is an ecological niche in which this bird seems to be quickly establishing itself. It may be of some significance that there is also an apparent increase in the numbers of the white heron (**Casmerodius albus**) indicated by the many birds now seen in the period of winter dispersal. In earlier days it was an event to see a solitary white heron in any one North Island district; now as many as four and five may be seen on one lake or lagoon. The numbers now reported from both islands in the winter period suggest that there may be one or more unknown breeding colonies in addition to the one near Okarito.

REFERENCES.

1888—Buller, Sir Walter; A History of the Birds of New Zealand (second edition).

1942—Falla, Dr. R. A.; White Herons in the Okarito District; Bulletin of the O.S. of N.Z., Number II.

1945—Ellis, B. A.; The White-faced Heron; N.Z. Bird Notes, Vol. 1, pp. 109-110.

A NOTE ON FLUTTERING SHEARWATERS.—The fondness of fluttering shearwater (**P. gavia**) for inshore waters was demonstrated in rather a remarkable manner on May 21 at the northern end of Goose Bay, Kaikoura. To judge by the excitement of the gulls, mainly red-billed, with a few black-billed and black-backed, the sea around the rocks was swarming with some favourite food. Just outside the line of rocks, riding a smooth swell, were about three hundred fluttering shearwaters. From time to time they would take to flight, only to return shortly to the same place. It was then that I noticed that some of the shearwaters were swimming and feeding inside the outer fringe of rocks with swaying kelp on all sides of them. As they were scarcely half a chain distant from me I was able to see that they had two distinctive methods of diving. Sometimes the actual dive was preceded by a little leap out of the water; sometimes there was no leap but they half-opened their wings and seemed to push themselves under the water. Often on surfacing they stood on their tails and shook their wings as if to adjust the feathers. Such feeding close inshore would only be possible if the breeze were blowing off the land. On May 21 the wind was a light north-wester. It would be interesting to know if anyone else has observed fluttering or other shearwaters behaving in a similar manner when conditions were such that they could safely feed so close inshore.—R. B. Sibson, Auckland.

NOTES ON THE GANNET.—These observations were made from my sword-fishing launch, Lone Star, up to seven miles off-shore from Whangaroa Heads. I was out several days each week throughout the season. Records of young gannets seen are: January 27, 1951, 1; Jan. 29, 1; Feb. 9, 3; Feb. 19, 1; March 2, 2; March 3, 1; March 4, 2. All of these birds were flying north singly, not feeding and taking no notice of any adult birds which were at times in their vicinity. The adults took no particular direction. On March 12, one of mixed plumage (white breaking through) was feeding on piper. Although out in the ocean, it was not high diving but using the long slanting dive which is normally adopted when fishing in very shallow water.—T. M. Roberts, Whangaroa.