

AN EXCURSION TO THE HERMITAGE.

By Dunedin Naturalists' Field Club.

During a Dunedin Naturalists' Field Club excursion to the Hermitage on January 15 to 24, 1951, on the whole, native bird life was not recorded to the extent expected, but possibly this was partly due to the fact that a good deal of time was spent in travelling, and recording from a moving bus has its limitations. The Tasman Valley, miles long and miles wide, is quite impossible to explore in nine days. Altogether, about three dozen species of birds were recorded.

The crested grebe was found on a little lake in the Mackenzie Country, apparently a haunt of this bird for many years judging by its Maori name. When the water in Lake Tekapo is raised an additional 15 feet, it is possible it may also raise the water in this little lake and the grebe may lose its nesting haunts. Altogether, we saw 13 adult birds and two young ones. A black shag was recorded at Lake Ohau and two at Lake Pukaki. The paradise duck was in disappointingly small numbers. In the bush near the Hermitage we were shown a hollow in a tree about eight feet from the ground where a paradise duck had made its nest. After two eggs had been laid the nest was deserted, probably because too much interest had been taken in it by the finder. The duck made another nest nearby in the bush and reared a family. On our last day seven or eight paradise ducks were seen on the bank of the Tasman River. The grey duck was seen in numbers along the Tasman Valley. Counts on Lake Pukaki on different days varied from 2 to 32. One flight of 16 was counted. A few were present on Lake Alexandrina. On Lake McGregor two flocks of about 20 to 30 black teal were noted; on Lake Alexandrina five birds, and on Lake Pukaki, four. Counts of black swan at the head of Lake Pukaki varied on different days, the largest being 31 adults and young. On the day the party left the Hermitage a solitary Canadian goose was seen beside Lake Pukaki.

The bush hawk was not noted by members, but a resident reported that it was present. From Dunedin to the Hermitage, via Kurow and Omarama, approximately 211 miles, a count of 31 harriers was made from a moving car. The day was very hot. On January 16, from Lake Ohau to Lake Pukaki there were six; from Pukaki to Hermitage, seven. The pukeko was present in swamy land at Lake Pukaki and in the lower Tasman Valley. The largest count was 13 plus. Two were noted near Lake Ohau. At the head of Lake Pukaki, where a stream ran through rush-grown ponds and gravel beds, there were numbers of banded dotterels. Their numbers varied up to about 12 or more. A pair of dotterels was present at Blue Stream, near the terminal moraine of the Tasman Glacier. On lagoons at the head of Lake Pukaki were five pied stilts; on a lagoon near the lower end of the lake, four; and near Lake Ohau, one. The black-fronted tern was seen as follows:—January 15, Kurow, 5; Jan. 16, Ohau River Bridge, 3; Jan. 14-24, counts from the Hermitage through the lower Tasman Valley and beside Lake Pukaki varied, the largest, 15, being on Jan. 16. On January 17, in the upper Tasman Valley from the Hooker River to Ball Hut, the count from a moving bus on the outward journey was 18, and on the return journey only 3. On January 17, when a stop was made at Blue Stream, at the terminal moraine of the Tasman Glacier, a small flock, 30 plus, was present on the shingle beside the stream. Among these were young birds. Adult birds were carrying billfuls of insects caught over the stream. A few black-backed gulls were seen in flight in the Tasman Valley. Near the Hooker Bridge, where the Hermitage pigs were fed on scraps from the hostel, a flock of 30 to 40 seemed to have taken up a more or less permanent abode. They were also about the Ball Hut. On the journey north on January 15, three dozen black-billed gulls were perched on the roof of the Oamaru Station. At the Waitaki Dam there were about 20. They were present in the Tasman Valley, at Lake Pukaki, Lake Ohau and Lake Alexandrina. At Lake Ohau a flock of about 50 frequented the camping grounds. When club members stopped for afternoon tea, they quickly transferred their attention to their party.

A resident of the Hermitage reported that there are a few native pigeons present, five being about the maximum seen. On January 15, about three dozen rock pigeons were counted at the limestone cliffs at Duntroon. The kea was not recorded by members, but other visitors to the Hermitage who did some climbing during our stay, reported six or seven on the mountains. Shining cuckoo calls were recorded early one morning and on another occasion a bird was seen. The morepork reported as once present in the neighbourhood of the Hermitage, had not been heard for some time. The little owl was not seen or heard at the Hermitage, but on the journey north, one was noticed perched on a post at Palmerston. About half a dozen riflemen might be seen in a walk through the bush about the Hermitage. Six were recorded in the beech forest on the shore of Lake Ohau. The rock wren was reported by a guide at the foot of Haast Ridge and in other alpine localities visited from the Hermitage. Six or seven pipits were noted on the road from Lake Pukaki to the Hermitage. At Ball Hut four were seen, and at the Blue Stream, four. The grey warbler was a fairly common bird where trees grew. On the walks to Kea Point, about 12 were counted. In Governor's Bush, when calls were made, five or six would respond. They were also present in beech forest at Lake Ohau. The yellow-breasted tit was another bird present in fairly satisfying numbers. A pair occupied the trees in front of the Hostel, and two more pairs had territory in the bush immediately at the back of the Hostel, and their songs were often heard. The nest of one pair was found about three feet from the ground, built in the angle formed by a branch with the trunk of a fuchsia tree where it rested against an overhanging rock. The nest contained four young ready to fly. Tits were also present in the beech forest at Lake Ohau. The count of fantails for the trip was 18 pied and five black. These lively little birds were sometimes seen indoor as well as out. The brown creeper was not definitely recorded. One or two birds seen near the Hermitage were possibly this species. The silvereye was frequently seen in small numbers, up to 10 or 12. The tui and bellbird were neither seen nor heard. Inquiries showed that one or two tuis were sometimes present, arriving before Christmas and departing at the first fall of snow, which was usually in May. These visits were not yearly events. Our informant, who was very interested in the bird life, took up his residence at Mt. Cook in 1924, and he had never seen or heard a bellbird there.

Sparrows, redpolls, goldfinches, chaffinches, greenfinches and yellowhammers were all seen repeatedly on the party's excursions around the Mackenzie Country. Sparrows were, as usual, common about farmlands, and some had nests, which were in occupation, under the eaves of the Hostel. One nest was found about five feet from the ground in a matagourie. It contained four eggs. Thrushes and blackbirds were exceedingly plentiful and were the commonest birds in the neighbourhood of the Hermitage. They were still in full song, though daytime song had almost ceased at Maori Hill, Dunedin, by January 15. In a patch of matagouri covering about an acre of ground beside a stream in the lower Tasman Valley, four empty nests of the thrush and three of the blackbird were found. In another area was a thrush's nest containing young. Numbers of hedge sparrows were seen, and this bird was also still in full song. The skylark was very common in the lower Tasman Valley. Always in the early morning there was a flock of 10 or 12 starlings feeding on the lawn. On all trips through the Mackenzie Country this bird was noted. Most flocks were small, but a few would number about 40 or 50. The white-backed magpie was not seen in the vicinity of the Hermitage, but about the lower end of Lake Pukaki a few were noted. On January 24, heavy rain was falling and visibility poor, but magpies were found to be much more plentiful between Lake Tekapo and Timaru than between Tekapo and Pukaki.