

OCCURRENCE OF WHITE-NECKED HERON IN N.Z.

By R. H. D. Stidolph, Masterton.

A strange bird appeared on a farm property near Methven, Canterbury, in mid-April, 1952, and Mr. John T. Oram, to whom full credit is due for bringing this bird to notice, sent a description, accompanied by a sketch, asking if the bird could be named. His description and sketch were ample enough to identify the bird as the white-necked heron (*Notophoxyx pacifica*) an Australian bird not hitherto recorded in New Zealand.

As the occurrence of this species in this country is of especial interest, Mr. Oram's description is given: "At first sight I thought the bird to be a white-fronted heron, then a reef heron, but since I have seen it take off in flight twice now and show conspicuous white patches on the wings, I cannot identify it. . . The following is as good a description as I am able to give: Colour: The head, throat and neck are white. The back and wings seem to be a blue-grey colour and sparkle in bright sunlight but appear dull on a cloudy day. When the bird is standing with its neck tucked back it appears to have a white breast but this is due to the white throat-feathers. I am unable to ascertain the true colour of the underparts but they seem to be blue-grey. The legs seem to be yellowish-green or grey. The bill seems to be grey-green. There are two distinct white patches on the leading edge of each wing that only show when the bird spreads its wings for a take-off or in flight."

Mr. Oram added that the bird was still there on July 27, 1952, the date of writing the above particulars, and that it was sharing a small pond with five geese which did not seem to notice it. It had lost most of its wariness and it was possible to approach within 100 yards at times before it would take off and settle in one of the paddocks. The property is near Methven, at the foot of the hills, about 32 miles from the coast, and three or four miles from the foot of Mount Hutt.

I identified the bird as the white-necked heron and sent a copy of the above description with a copy of the sketch to Mr. K. A. Hindwood, of Sydney, asking for his confirmation or otherwise. Mr. Hindwood replied stating that the description, etc., of the heron agreed with the Pacific heron (white-necked) and that the white patches on the fore part of the wing were more or less diagnostic. "There is no other Australian species that could be confused with it; in size it is actually a good deal larger than the white-faced heron but the difference cannot be appreciated properly until both birds are close together," Mr. Hindwood stated.

After I had written to Mr. Oram informing him of the above confirmation of identification, he sent additional particulars. He states that there is a pure creamy white line extending down the bird's throat feathers, the chin and base of the lower beak having the same colouring. The head and neck are really a dirty white. This streak on the bird's throat shows up well in bright sunshine, when it can be very distinctive. Also, in bright sunlight, though the main colouring appears nearly royal blue, there seems to be a rich wine red sheen or sparkle overlying the blue. The underparts are pale blue or grey. The bird flies short distances with the neck outstretched but when in full flight the head is drawn back and the legs trailed out behind. The wings are large and beat slowly, though strongly."

An influx of large numbers of the white-necked heron into southern Victoria in the spring and summer of 1951 is recorded in the *Emu*, Vol. 52, page 218, by Ina Watson. This evidence of a considerable dispersal movement supports the appearance of the bird in New Zealand and as it is possible that others of its kind may have reached this country, all herons seen should be critically examined. I wish to thank Mr. Hindwood for his assistance.

CLASSIFIED NOTES.—Members are reminded that classified notes for the January issue require to be in the hands of the editor not later than October 14.