

THE MAHUKI GANNET COLONY.

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In the October, 1952, issue of "Notornis," No. 14, page 54 is an account of the Mahuki gannet colony by C. A. Fleming and K. A. Wodzicki. As I made a visit to the colony on the afternoon of January 7, 1953, the following notes may be of interest. The gannets were approached from the landward side via the narrow promontory which connects the colony with the grasslands of the island. About half an hour was taken from the time we first saw the birds until we were resting on the narrow isthmus watching the birds at close quarters. All hats and coats were removed so that there would be nothing to frighten the birds. As only one person approached the colony at any one time the precautions taken resulted in a series of very interesting photographs, the gannets taking no notice of the human invaders.

On the occasion of my previous visit to the colony on December 26, 1950, a landing was made from the seaward side, and by the time we reached the plateau all of the birds that could fly had left, leaving only a few young birds in the down stage. There were no eggs in any of the nests. The birds at that visit were wild in the extreme. Dr. W. M. Hamilton, in his report of a visit on 27/12/1946, stated that the gannets were extremely wary on that date.

On January 7, 1953, the birds were still sitting close on eggs, young were seen from the "powder-puff" stage right up to immatures able to fly; three of the latter were seen in the air over the colony. We counted the birds and got a tally of just over 800 gannets, including all the young birds that we could actually see not covered by the adult bird. I estimated that there may have been 40 young birds not counted, as I had a closer look later. Photographs showed an equal number of young and adults and on this basis I estimated a total of over 1200 birds in the colony, excluding "unemployed" birds which were away from the colony during the day—perhaps 1400 birds in all.

In December, 1951, a landing was not made but I passed the colony several times until the first week in January and made several counts of the birds. The largest number estimated at 7 p.m. one evening was 1100, working on an "area" basis. It would appear that there has been a good increase in the colony this season. Further developments will be watched with interest.

Many nesting sites were not occupied and it is clear that at one time the colony must have contained at least 2000 birds. The Maoris told me that many years ago the young birds were taken each year and potted in their own fat in casks, but this practice died out when casks were no longer available. Many of the young birds were fed while we watched. I noticed that in each case a red-billed gull flew close overhead and hovered until the adult gannet flew away. The gull then quickly dropped down and snatched any food dropped on the ground. At the same time the young gannet and others in the vicinity made a lunge at the gull without actually pecking it. This attitude of animosity against the red-billed gull manifested itself at other times as I witnessed many lunges towards a gull flying low overhead.

No gannet with eggs left the nest unguarded for a second. None of the birds was disturbed, however, as not one of us went through the colony. Only one "display" of adult birds was noted. The pair stretched their necks out upwards to their full extent and with wings half closed extended them outwards at right angles to wave slightly while they made queer throaty noises. Bills were rubbed together smartly several times and the birds went back to the position with the neck stretched upwards to the full.