

NOTES ON THE BIRDS OF THE CHATHAM ISLANDS.

By L. C. Bell, Wildlife Division, Department of Internal Affairs.

During the period 22 June to 27 July 1951 and December 16 1952 and 6 February 1953, I visited the Chatham Islands in the course of my duties as a Senior Field Officer of the Wildlife Division, Department of Internal Affairs, on work relating to the conservation of game birds and indigenous birds. The last account of the bird life was by C. A. Fleming (1939 Emu, Vo. 38).

The group was covered fairly fully in the course of my work. In addition to the main Chatham Island some of the smaller islands of the group (Pitt Island, South East Island, The Sisters and the Forty-fours) were visited on my second trip.

The natural plant covering on the main Chatham Island, Pitt Island and South East Island has been much modified by bush felling, firing of vegetation and pastoral farming. The bush areas left on the main island are dying out very rapidly except in the small southern corner. The bush does not regenerate as it is browsed by stock. The destruction of undergrowth by browsing stock has allowed the wind to get in among the taller trees and to dry out the forest floor. It was apparent that many trees get killed when the winds are especially strong. The dense coastal forest in the south has feral pigs, sheep and cattle in it, but the undergrowth in parts of this area is still undamaged; much supple-jack (*Rhipogonum scandens*) and the tree fern (*Dicksonia fibrosa*) survive there in places. On Pitt Island it was again evident that the forest was moribund. The island is used for pastoral farming; dead and dying bush stood over most of the southern half and it is not regenerating except in inaccessible gullies. As yet, however, native birds are more plentiful here than on the main island. There are no rats, mustelids, opossums or rabbits on Pitt Island, but wild cats and mice are common. I also visited the nearby South East Island, the last haunt of the shore plover (*Thinornis novaeaeclandiae*) and saw the bush in a similar state.

The following is an account of the birds seen. Localities referred to may be found on the standard county map of the area (N.Z. MS 15).

Little Blue Penguin (*Eudyptula minor*).—On the main island of the group these birds are plentiful over all suitable coastline. Residents state that they are increasing to such an extent that they are displacing the sooty shearwater (*Puffinus griseus*). In my opinion, these penguins would withstand the impact of grazing better than this shearwater. I found thirteen penguins killed by dogs on the coast just west of Kaingaroa. Penguins were quite common round the coast of Pitt Island during January, 1953, and on South East Island about the same time, when they were in the moult.

Royal Albatross (*Diomedea epomophora sanfordi*).—On the smaller and more easterly of the two biggest islands of The Sisters on December 16, 1952, royal albatrosses were sitting on eggs. The population of breeding pairs of albatrosses on this island was assessed to be 1000. The islanders once took supplies of callow young for food from the eastern island and sometimes also from the west island, the other big island of this group. A very large number of albatrosses were nesting on top of the Forty-fours which I visited the next day. I could not get to the top, but judged by the area of the island and the density of the birds, the breeding population was similar to that on the Sisters Island mentioned, i.e., 1,000 pairs. The islanders also took unfledged young from this island for food before 1943. They state that three to four hundred birds were taken each trip and that sometimes more than one trip was made in a season.

Buller's Mollymawk (*Diomedea bulleri*).—Many Buller's mollymawks were sitting on eggs on the smaller of the two Sisters on December 16, occupying all the ledges and holes in the cliff faces as well as the steep faces at the top of the cliffs. Other Buller's mollymawks were seen from a distance nesting on a small stack at the north end of the biggest island of

the Sisters. According to the islanders only a few young were taken each year in June before birding ceased in 1943.

Giant Petrel (*Macronectes giganteus*).—I saw 100 young birds, both fledgeling and downy chicks, on the smaller of the Sisters on December 16.

Broad-billed Prion (*Pachyptila vittata*).—These birds breed on Pitt Island where the wild cats prey upon them.

Petrel (sp.).—On the north-west side of the most easterly of the two big islands of the Sisters Group some petrel burrows were found, but what species made them is unknown. The burrows were found in a patch of carex where there is a little soil. On the South East Island, where soil was consolidated by stock, breeding colonies of petrels have disappeared. In some places there were just one or two burrows remaining in use.

Storm Petrel (*Pelagodroma marina maoriana*).—These birds breed on Pitt Island and wild cats kill large numbers at nesting time.

Black Shag (*Phalacrocorax carbo novae-hollandiae*).—This bird was not so common as the Chatham Island shag on the Te Whanga Lagoon in 1951.

Chatham Island Shag (*Phalacrocorax carunculatus onslowi*).—This bird was plentiful on Te Whanga Lagoon in mid-winter, 1951.

Pitt Island Shag (*Stictocarbo punctatus featherstoni*).—A few of these birds were roosting on the most easterly of the four Sisters Islands on December 16, 1952. This island, which is very flat, is mostly awash at high water. They were present at Pitt Island when I went there a fortnight later.

White Heron (*Egretta alba*).—A white heron was shot by a duck-hunter in June 1951 at the south end of Te Whanga Lagoon near the mouth of the Te Awainanga River. This is the first recorded visit of this species to the Chathams as far as I could find out from the residents.

Black Swan (*Cygnus atratus*).—Residents told me that swans are increasing. They certainly are not decreasing though they are shot for food throughout the year and many eggs are taken for culinary purposes. They also said that they took an estimated 20,000 eggs in 1952. I spent some hours on 30 December 1952, walking about a large nesting area in Te Whanga Lagoon. Many swans were still sitting on clutches of up to seven eggs. At Motuhinahina Island a weka had eaten swan eggs and had also killed some cygnets. Swans are said to appear sometimes on the small lake near Trig F on Pitt Island.

Grey Teal (*Anas gibberifrons gracilis*).—An adult drake was shot at the north end of Te Whanga Lagoon on 1 July 1951 and the skin is now in the Dominion Museum. This appears to be the first record for the Chatham Group.

Brown Duck (*Anas castanea chlorotis*).—If this species survives in the Chatham Islands it will only be found on the lakes inland from the south-west coast of the main island.

Grey Duck (*Anas superciliosa superciliosa*).—According to local sportsmen the grey duck is abundant on the main island and is on the increase at present. They attribute the increase to less frequent burning off of the vegetation on the lake shores during the nesting season than practised a few years ago. The best place for ducks on the Te Whanga Lagoon is said to be on its north-eastern shore. I could not get along this shore line to make a count on either of my visits, but nevertheless I was disappointed in the numbers of ducks I saw. Two hundred were seen in winter 1951 near Awapatiki on Te Whanga Lagoon and seventy more along the shore just north of Te Kiato Point, mostly in pairs. It appeared to me that the many low-lying areas suitable for ducks to feed in are not being fully utilised so that there should have been more ducks about in view of the habitat available. A sportsman told me that he shot 157 ducks in 1951 from May 1 to July 16; however, others said they get less. This duck also inhabits the small lake at Pitt Island and I saw forty birds there

in January 1953. At South East Island an adult bird with two ducklings was seen at the end of January.

Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*).—I saw three mallards on Te Whanga Lagoon near Hapupu in December 1952. Mallards were evidently liberated on the Chathams many years ago by a resident, but there do not appear to have been any recent liberations. Some mallards were shot during the shooting season of 1952.

Harrier (*Circus approximans*).—There were odd harriers about in June-July 1951, all over the main island, and on Pitt Island, early in 1953; there were twenty on South East Island at this time.

Californian Quail (*Lophortyx californica*).—On the main island these birds appear to be confined to the northern parts, where I saw about thirty on the shore of Lake Koomutu. Probably most of the southern area (especially the peat lands) is too wet to suit them. There are a few birds on North Head of Pitt Island.

Pukeko (*Porphyrio melanotus*).—The residents say that pukeko are increasing and causing damage in places, particularly to crops of potatoes. However, they are not plentiful by mainland standards except in the small Porua Creek near Waitangi. A few were also present between the Air Base Lagoon and Wharekauri and at Pitt Island.

Weka (*Gallirallus australis hectori*).—Wekas are well distributed throughout the main island. Residents say they do damage and are increasing; they are hunted in June-July.

Spotless Crane (*Porzana tabuensis plumbea*).—One was caught by a dog at Moera in 1949.

Oystercatcher (*Haematopus unicolor chathamensis*).—On the main island I saw a few on the rocky south coast and on sandy beaches of the north coast also on South East Island.

Banded Dotterel (*Charadrius bicinctus*).—I saw a few pairs in June-July 1951 on the peat clears (moors) of the main island, where they breed.

Shore Plover (*Thinornis novaeseelandiae*).—There were several pairs with chicks on the shores of South East Island at the end of January 1953. The chicks varied in age from a few days to fledgling. Several additional pairs with chicks inhabited an area on top of the cliff on the island's western side.

Bush Snipe (*Cœnocorypha zucklandica pusilla*).—This bird was once common on South East Island but I saw none there during my short stay of somewhat more than a day in January 1953. A man who helped to shear the island's sheep prior to my visit told me he saw only two snipe in a fortnight's stay. There is very little ground cover there now to support snipe and some of what is left has been periodically burnt. The shearer was quite certain that the snipe had declined in numbers in recent years.

Skua (*Stercorarius skua lonnbergi*).—There were fledglings and downy chicks of this species on the island of the Sisters group inspected on December 16.

Black-backed Gull (*Larus dominicanus*).—Common over the whole of the main island.

Silver Gull (*Larus novaehollandiae*).—Common on the main island. They sometimes come inland.

White-fronted Tern (*Sterna striata*).—A small colony was nesting on the eastern island of the Sisters Group on December 16.

Pigeon (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae chathamensis*).—During my first stay only six were seen, all south of Waitangi. It appears that they were quite plentiful in the northern areas of the main island a few years ago though now they are rarely seen there. The factor limiting their abundance is doubtless the disappearance of bush. I saw pigeons on Pitt Island on my second visit to the Chatham group.

Parakeets (*Cyanorhampus* sp.)—No parakeets were seen on the main island in my 1951 visit though one was definitely heard on the south-west coast. They are apparently decreasing. The red-fronted parakeet (*C. novaeseelandiae chathamensis*) survived on Pitt Island in early 1953. From my observations it is probably the most plentiful bird on South East Island where it went about in small flocks feeding on the seeds of the Chatham Island aster, *acaena* burrs, and some substance from the salt meadow on the island's shore.

Pied Fantail (*Rhipidura fuliginosa penitus*).—Few fantails were seen on my first visit, four in the bush between Te One and Te Whanga Lagoon, several near the Horns on the south-west coast and a few other places with a few more on Pitt Island. It was very disappointing to see so few when in the main islands of New Zealand, where vermin are more plentiful, they are holding their own.

Pied Tit (*Petroica macrocephala chathamensis*).—I did not see these birds on the main island in winter 1951, but at that time a lady at Owenga told me that she saw one the previous summer in a plantation. They did not appear to be present in the dense bush in the south of the island, and the total population must be small indeed. They were observed on Pitt Island early in 1953 and were common on South East Island.

Warbler (*Gerygone albofrontata*).—Warblers were not common on the main island during my 1951 visit, even in places resembling those favoured by the grey warbler (*G. igata*) on the mainland of New Zealand. They were recorded on Pitt Island in 1953 and were common on South East Island.

Song Thrush (*Turdus ericetorum*).—Present on the main island; seen on Pitt Island.

Blackbird (*Turdus merula*).—On main island, on Pitt Island and South East Island.

Hedge Sparrow (*Prunella modularis occidentalis*).—Distributed practically throughout the main island and seen on Pitt and South East Islands.

Pipit (*Anthus novaeseelandiae*).—On my first visit I found these birds over practically the whole main island, often in parties of up to 12. Several pairs were seen on the Sisters Island examined on 26 December 1952 and there were more on Pitt and South East Islands.

Tui (*Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae chathamensis*).—The tui appears to be decreasing from what the residents told me. The few seen in my winter visit of 1951 were in the Nairn River Valley. I saw twelve on insignis pine trees on the south-west coast, feeding actively among the pine needles, either sipping water or eating insects off them. They also ate the berries of the hoho (*Pseudopanax chathamica*) at this time. Tuys were present on Pitt Island; rare on South East Island.

White-eye (*Zosterops lateralis*).—Numerous over the whole main island and in the bush on Pitt Island.

Greenfinch (*Chloris chloris*).—Seen on Pitt Island.

Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*).—Throughout the main island; present on Pitt Island.

Lesser Redpoll (*Carduelis flammea*).—On the main island, on Pitt and South East Islands.

Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs gengleri*).—Seen on Pitt Island and South East Island and over the whole main island.

House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*).—Main island and on Pitt Island.

Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*).—Main island, South East and Pitt Islands; a flock of 100 birds near Glory Bay, Pitt Island, was feeding on the fleshy seed pods of the Muhlenbeckia vine.