

THE BIRDS OF THE CHATHAM ISLANDS 1954 EXPEDITION.

By Elliot W. Dawson, Christchurch.

Recently, the New Zealand Oceanographic Committee sponsored an expedition to the Chatham Islands region. The objects were to make as complete a survey as possible of the physical oceanography, marine and terrestrial fauna and incidental biology of the seas east of Banks Peninsula to the Chathams. It was also hoped that some investigation could be made into the birds on these islands in general, and in particular, into the sea birds of the outliers of this group. This account is offered as a preliminary report on the ornithological work; material for a scientific report is being presented separately.

The scientific party and crew included five members of the Ornithological Society of New Zealand, Messrs. R. K. Dell, R. R. Forster, J. Moreland, J. C. Yaldwyn and E. W. Dawson, so it is not surprising that birds received considerable attention.

The expedition, in the former naval launch "Alert," left Lyttelton on the evening of January 23, 1954, bound for dredging stations on the Mernoo Bank, a seamount rising to 35 fathoms about 120 miles N.-E. of Lyttelton. It was proposed to spend some time on the crossing to the Chathams dredging and trawling over this bank and also along the Chatham Rise, another low bank connecting the Mernoo to the Chathams.

While the sea had a moderately heavy swell during most of the crossing the weather was favourable and provided good bird watching conditions. Two or three wandering albatrosses with various dark plumages were always with us, as were also many small petrels, including fluttering shearwaters, Buller's shearwater, grey-faced petrel, white-faced storm petrel and grey-backed storm petrel. In addition to these, we saw several other small dark petrels, the identification of which provided us with an ever-ready topic of conversation at breakfast. Among these birds were some considered to be black petrels, white-chinned petrels and black-bellied storm petrels.

Several mollymawks came in close to the "Alert" at this time. These included two stages of immature black-browed mollymawk and several Bounty Island shy mollymawks, skuas and nellies visited us on several occasions, and on one occasions a royal albatross was seen close by.

On the morning of the third day at sea we sighted the Pyramid, an unmistakable conical stack, some 600 feet high, lying to the south of the main Chathams group. With our entry into Chathams coastal waters, sea birds became more numerous and we saw nellies in good number, Chatham Island Fulmar prions, many more white-faced storm petrels, and mutton birds.

After passing close to the south coast of South East Island we anchored in Glory Bay, Glitt Island. Here we felt quite at home with numbers of white-fronted terns, red-billed gulls and black-backed gulls. However, strangers appeared in the form of Buller's mollymawks, Pitt Island shags and Chatham Island shags.

Three of us spent the night ashore a little to the south of Glory Bay. Here in the coastal bush, Chatham Island tits and warblers were common, and a few tuis and red-fronted parakeets were encountered. No sign of pigeons was evident, despite the fact that this part of Pitt Island was thought to be one of their haunts. On the sandy shore pipits were often seen, while on the rocky shore oystercatchers, white-fronted terns and red-billed gulls were seen. A few introduced passerines including two young chaffinches were also seen in this coastal bush. A grey duck was seen on a slow stream in Glory Bay.

From Pitt Island we set our course for Owenga, a fishing village on the east coast of the main Chatham Island. Together with several white-capped mollymawks and Chatham Island shags a single Chatham Island

mollymawk trailed us across Pitt Strait to Owenga. After a day here, during which few birds were seen, except black-backed gulls and an occasional mollymawk, the expedition sailed for Kaingaroa, trawling and dredging in rough seas on the way. Birds seen at Kaingaroa in coastal bush and dunes included harriers, fantails, pipits and redpolls. Five members of the party spent the next day ashore in the vicinity of Kaingaroa while others on the "Alert" occupied dredging stations between Kaingaroa and Waitangi West on the north-west coast. Mr. MacIntyre and I spent the day as the guests of Mr. Vallance, manager of the Barker Estate, to whom our thanks are due. We were provided with horses which enabled us to visit the shag colonies at Okawa described by C. A. Fleming. Here about 50 Chatham Island shags and some six or eight Pitt Island shags were seen roosting but we were unable to approach closer to these rocks due to the state of the tide. Wekas and pukekos were abundant in the swamps, so much so that they are locally regarded as a nuisance.

Early the next morning, January 29, the expedition left Kaingaroa for the Sisters, a group of two islets and a reef, lying about 12 miles north of the main Chatham Island and thus about 24 miles north-west of Kaingaroa. The whole party was landed safely by 8.18 a.m. and occupied themselves making acquaintances with royal albatrosses, Buller's mollymawks, nellies and fur seals. By 2.20 p.m. we were aboard the "Alert" once more, and after a few of us had landed on the low-lying reef and made an examination of the inter-tidal zone, a census of the seals and observations on the birds, we set course for Waitangi, the main township, carrying out dredging stations along the way.

On the eastern islet of the Sisters group, there were at the time of our visit about 500 pairs of royal albatrosses nesting among the low scrub of *Cotula renwicki* on the flat top. Most of these birds had eggs, some of which were just hatching, and others had chicks only a few days old. Though unable to land on the western islet, I estimated it to have a population of about 750 to 800 pairs of royal. There were approximately 250 breeding pairs of Buller's mollymawks on the eastern islet. Most of these, nesting among the rocks on the sloping sides away from the flat tops, had chicks up to a week or ten days old. Forty-four of the adult breeding birds were marked with Ornithological Society rings as also were 17 juvenile nellies. About 20 of these almost fully-fledged birds were seen with three adults on the eastern islet. Their unpleasant habits and careless regard for the clothing of those handling them quickly led us to refer to them by their alternative name of "Stinker."

A few downy chicks and adult mutton birds were found in burrows on the eastern Sister. In other burrows two almost fully-fledged young of the Chatham fulmar prion were found.

A pair of skuas with a flying youngster frequented the highest part of the eastern Sister and seemed to have a diet ranging from small storm petrels and prions to juvenile nellies and albatross chicks.

Pipits were abundant among the rocks and had numbers of flying young. An abandoned nest with an added egg was found.

Judging by the large numbers of the season's young present, Pitt Island shags, white-fronted terns and red-billed gulls also appear to breed on the Sisters.

The next two days (January 30 to 31) were spent in the vicinity of Waitangi, where hydrographic work and inter-tidal collecting were carried out. The land party, of which I was a member, made invertebrate collections along the sand dunes and along the shores of Lake Huro and Te Whanga Lagoon, examined Mori occupation sites, collected fossils and dredged and trawled in the lagoon. In the vicinity of Lake Huro were seen pukekos, grey duck and a few blackbirds. Along the shores of Te Whanga Lagoon, pukekos, fantails, including one albino, and warblers were common. Red-billed gulls and white-fronted terns were abundant with large numbers of black swan on the lagoon itself. The scene was reminiscent of Lake Ellesmere apart from the presence of red-billed gulls in place of black-billed gulls.

On February 1 we left Waitangi at 4.15 a.m. for the Forty Fours, a group consisting of an islet and a few stacks lying about 20 miles due east of the main Chatham Island. Due to the difficulties involved in landing on the main islet only two of the party were able to get ashore. They were greeted on landing by a solitary erect-crested penguin standing amongst a group of fur seals. While the shore party made notes on the birds and the other fauna, the rest of the expedition carried out a very successful dredging station east of the Forty Fours in 130 fathoms. After picking up the shore party at 4 p.m., the expedition cleared the Forty Fours for Pitt Island and anchored at 10.45 p.m. in Waihere Bay.

An estimate of the breeding royal albatrosses on the Forty Fours revealed about 2,000 pairs. More than half the nests appeared to contain chicks. The breeding population of Buller's mollymawk here was estimated at nearly 4,000 pairs. Almost all the nests had chicks up to over a week old. Thus nesting activities were somewhat more advanced here than on the Sisters. Buller's mollymawk was commonly seen in Chatham coastal waters from the north to the south-west of the Chathams, but it was never seen west of the islands.

Additional evidence was gathered during the Chathams Expedition which may shed some light on the curious anomaly in breeding times between Buller's mollymawk on the Snarcs (estimated hatching mid-March to early May) and on the Chathams (hatching in late January to February).

Larger numbers of juvenile nellies were present on the Forty Fours. Remains of Chatham fulmar prions and broad-billed prions were found. Pipits and starlings were seen in abundance by the shore party. All the shags seen in the vicinity of the Forty Fours were Pitt Island shags.

The next day we moved past the ornithologically famous Mangare and Little Mangare islands towards South East Island, where we contemplated a landing in a very rough sea. Having decided against this we dredged at two stations and, after trying a number of anchorages in a heavy sea and a high wind, eventually anchored off the north shore of Pitt Island. Many Pitt Island shags were seen during the day but only one Chatham Island shag.

On the following morning a shore party was landed on South East Island for about two hours. Three of us spent the rest of the day and night ashore making invertebrate collections and bird observations while the rest of the party dredged south of South East Island down to 330 fathoms. During our evening ashore, we wandered through the bush with a lantern and were bombarded with innumerable white-faced storm petrels with a lesser number of broad-billed prions.

The chief attraction on South East Island is, of course, the shore plover. These birds were common on the rocky shore platforms and two juveniles of the year were seen here. Several shore plovers, belying their name, were seen on the grassy slopes near the summit of the island (678 feet). Near the landing place, Mr. MacIntyre found a nest with a clutch of three in a narrow crevice in the rocks. These plovers were an obvious and most interesting feature during our time ashore and provided fascinating material for observation by even the non-ornithologically minded among our party.

Also on the rock platforms were several Chatham Island oystercatchers—an interesting sight for comparison with the New Zealand forms of pied oystercatchers. Flights of starlings were often seen in the evening and other introduced birds present included house sparrows, hedge sparrows, redpolls, song thrushes and blackbirds.

In the bush, tuis were occasionally seen but more often heard. Chatham Island tits were abundant here with lesser numbers of warblers and a few fantails were seen. The commonest bush bird was undoubtedly the red-fronted parakeet which was everywhere abundant. Flocks of 10 or 12 birds were a frequent sight in the swampy higher parts of the island. Pipits were also common in the open tussock-covered areas.

Blue penguins were noisy in the evening on the bracken-covered slopes above the landing place and I came across a few during the night wandering through the grass.

The usual array of red-billed gulls and black-backed gulls was present on the rocky shore. A pair of adult skuas frequented the landing place. Towards dusk these and the black-backed gulls became increasingly vociferous—perhaps in anticipation of a supper of white-faced storm petrel!

No sign of pigeons was evident on South East Island.

The next day, February 4, was spent anchored in Whalers Bay, South East Island, and collections were sorted out while other members of the party went ashore for short periods.

Following this, on February 5, we plunged through a rough sea towards the Pyramid but changed our course towards the Star Keys, a group of reefs and an islet lying about 12 miles to the north of South East Island. Although conditions were not suitable for landing, we approached within 50 yards of the islet, Round Island, and noted large concentrations of Chatham Island shags with a large proportion of juveniles roosting on the cliffs. Pitt Island shags were also present but they were less than half as abundant as the other species. In the surrounding waters we saw several Buller's mollymawks, an odd royal albatross, Salvin's shy mollymawk and diving petrel. No sign of breeding albatrosses or mollymawks was seen on Round Island. From the Star Keys we proceeded to Owenga where we spent the afternoon shore collecting. The next day was spent in the vicinity of Owenga and we proceeded round the south coast as far as Cape L'Eveque and returned to anchor in Hanson Bay. At 4.00 a.m. the next day we left Owenga for Kaingaroa where we spent the day dredging and trawling. On the following day, February 8, we worked our way to Port Hutt on the west coast of the main island and spent the day shore collecting and re-organising. At dusk several flights of starlings were seen and weka calls were often heard. Pipits, redpolls, red-billed gulls, black-backed gulls and Pitt Island shags were common at times along the sandy beach and rocky shore. We finally left Port Hutt at 7.00 p.m. on February 9 bound for Lyttelton.

The crossing occupied the next three days (Feb. 10, 11, 12) during which full oceanographic stations were made every four hours, each station taking about three hours. The birds seen during the return were essentially of the same species as those seen when outward bound, except that relatively more cape pigeons and black petrels were seen. Our berth at Lyttelton was reached by 8.45 p.m. on February 12.

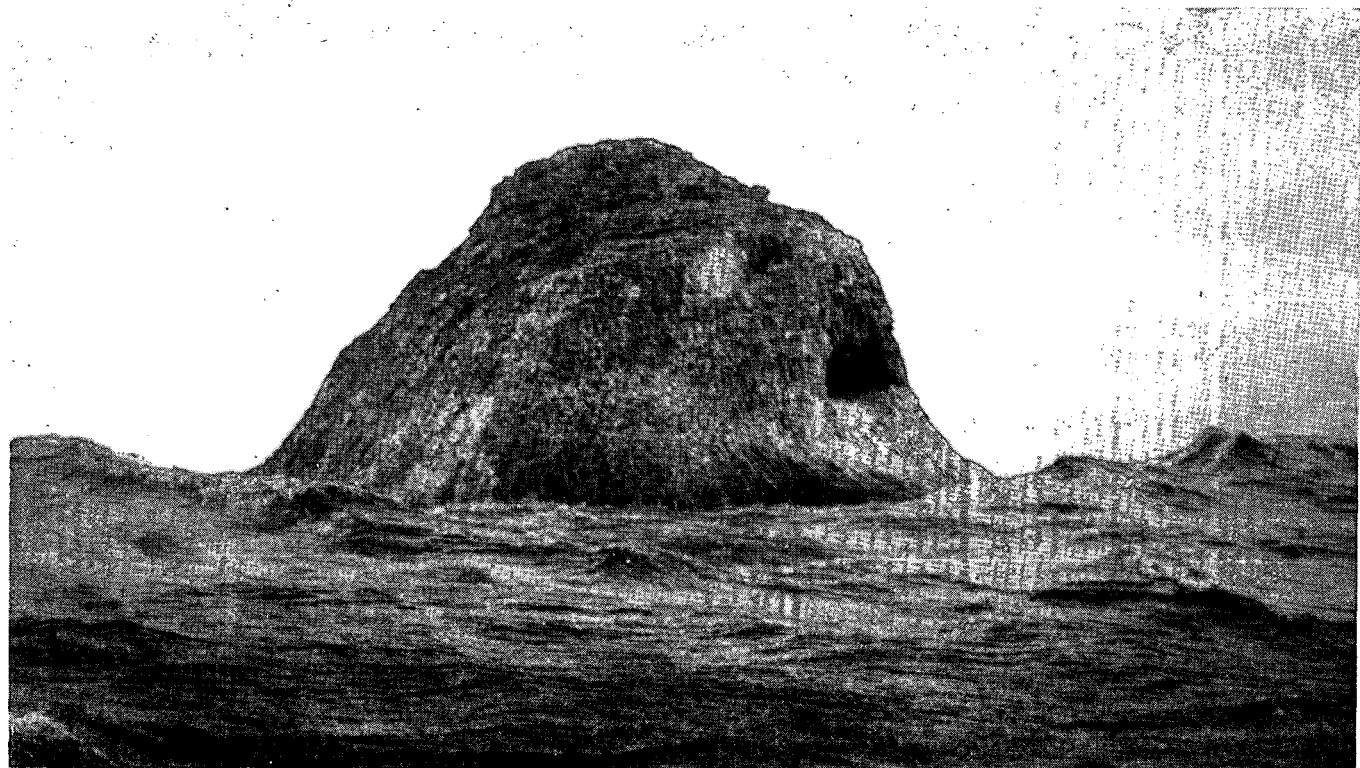
Our work on the outlying islands provided some definite data on the birds inhabiting them and their breedings. Being primarily concerned with marine matters we spent little time ashore on the main island but enough to find that several aspects of the avifauna have changed since Dr. C. A. Fleming's time (1937) in particular the increase of pukekos. South East Island is indeed a rare ornithological gem. There appear to be no vermin and both its bush birds and its breeding petrels seem tremendously abundant. The whole Chathams region is full of interest from an ornithological viewpoint and I must take this opportunity of thanking Mr. G. A. Knox, leader of the expedition, for his kindness in including me as a member.

SCIENTIFIC NAMES OF BIRDS MENTIONED.

Southern Blue Penguin: *Eudyptula minor minor*.
Erect-crested Penguin: *Eudyptes pachyrhynchus sclateri*.
Wandering Albatross: *Diomedea exulans exulans*.
Northern Royal Albatross: *Diomedea epomophora sanfordi*.
N.Z. Black-browed Mollymawk: *Diomedea melanophris impavida*.
Buller's Mollymawk: *Diomedea bulleri*.
White-capped Mollymawk: *Diomedea cauta cauta*.
Chatham Island Mollymawk: *D. cauta eremita*.

Salvin's (Bounty Is.) Mollymawk: *D. cauta salvini*.
 Giant Petrel (Nelly): *Macronectes giganteus*.
 Cape Pigeon: *Daption capensis capensis*.
 Broad-billed Prion: *Pachyptila vittata vittata*.
 Chatham Fulmar Prion: *P. crassirostris pyramidalis*.
 Buller's Shearwater: *Puffinus bulleri*.
 N.Z. Muttonbird: *Puffinus griseus*.
 Fluttering Shearwater: *Puffinus gavia gavia*.
 Black Petrel: *Procellaria parkinsoni*.
 White-chinned Petrel: *Procellaria aequinoctialis steadi*.
 Grey-faced Petrel: *Pterodroma macroptera gouldi*.
 Grey-backed Storm Petrel: *Garrodia nereis*.
 White-faced Storm Petrel: *Pelagodroma marina maoriana*.
 Black-bellied Storm Petrel: *Fregetta tropica*.
 Southern Diving Petrel: *Pelecanoides urinatrix chathamensis*.
 Chatham Is. Shag: *Phalacrocorax (Leucocarbo) carunculatus onslowi*.
 Pitt Island Shag: *P. (Stictocarbo) punctatus featherstoni*.
 Black Swan: *Cygnus atratus*.
 Grey Duck: *Anas superciliosa superciliosa*.
 Harrier: *Circus approximans*.
 Eastern Weka: *Gallirallus australis hectori*.
 Pukeko: *Porphyrio porphyrio melanotus*.
 Chatham Island Oystercatcher: *Haematopus unicolor chathamensis*.
 Shore Plover: *Thinornis novaeseelandiae*.
 Southern Skua: *Stercorarius skua lonnbergi*.
 Black-backed Gull: *Larus dominicanus*.
 Red-billed Gull: *Larus novaehollandiae scopulinus*.
 White-fronted Tern: *Sterna striata*.
 Pigeon: *Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae chathamensis*.
 Chatham Island (Red-fronted) Parakeet: *Cyanoramphus novaeseelandiae chathamensis*.
 Chatham Island Fantail: *Rhipidura fuliginosa penitus*.
 Chatham Island Tit: *Petroica macrocephala chathamensis*.
 Chatham Island Warbler: *Gerygone albofrontata*.
 Song Thrush: *Turdus ericetorum*.
 Blackbird: *Turdus merula*.
 Hedge Sparrow: *Prunella modularis occidentalis*.
 Pipit: *Anthus novaeseelandiae novaeseelandiae*.
 Chatham Is. Tui: *Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae chathamensis*.
 Lesser Redpoll: *Carduelis flammea cabaret*.
 Chaffinch: *Fringilla coelebs gengleri*.
 House Sparrow: *Passer domesticus*.
 Starling: *Sturnus vulgaris*.

DONATIONS ACKNOWLEDGED.—Grateful thanks are due to the following members for donations received:—General Fund: Mr. and Mrs. J. Prickett, £1 15s; Mr A. R. Annabel, £1 4s. 6d; Messrs. H. R. McKenzie, J. A. Fagan, £1 1s.; Messrs. J. Prickett, J. Edmond, A. A. Boulton, E. St. Paul £1; Mr. J. R. Jackson, 14s; Mr N. J. Crew, 13s. 6d; Messrs. A. H. Watson, A. B. Eden, 12s. 6d; Miss G. di Menna, Miss B. McDougall, 10s.; Mr. W. H. Watters 8s.; Mr J. Cunningham, 7s. 6d.; Mr B. Ellis, 5s. 9d.; Messrs. E. C. Worthington, R. V. Roberts, G. K. McKenzie, G. F. Penlington, F. Murray, E. Dear, Mrs M. S. Bragg, Anon., 5s.; Mr A. A. Savill, 3s 6d; Mr M. G. Gibson, 3s.; Mrs. C. R. Orum, Rev. F. H. Robertson, Mr and Mrs R. H. D. Stidolph, Mrs O. McCulloch, Mrs K. L. Spratt, Miss S. E. Kearns, Miss K. Blomfield, Miss M. L. Johnston, Messrs. M. G. Crawford, H. S. Munro, R. Ferguson, J. A. Martin, B. S. Chambers, W. F. I. Hunt, C. D. Blomfield, F. J. Cuming, C. G. Young, C. Tattersall, E. W. Dawson, J. Moreland, Anon, 2s 6d; Messrs. J. L. Moore, J. Barlee, 2s.; Miss P. Waymouth 1s. Illustrations Fund: Dr. C. A. Fleming, £3 10s.; Mr. B. Sladden, £2; Mr. J. A. Fagan, £1 1s.; Mr P. A. S. Stein, 10s.; Mr E. W. Dawson, 5s.



APPROACHING THE PYRAMID, CHATHAM ISLANDS, January 25, 1954.
The Nesting Area of the Chatham Islands Mollymawk.

Photo: G. A. Knox.



Photo: E. W. Dawson.

NESTING BULLERS' WITH EGGS AND CHICKS, THE SISTERS, January 29, 1954.

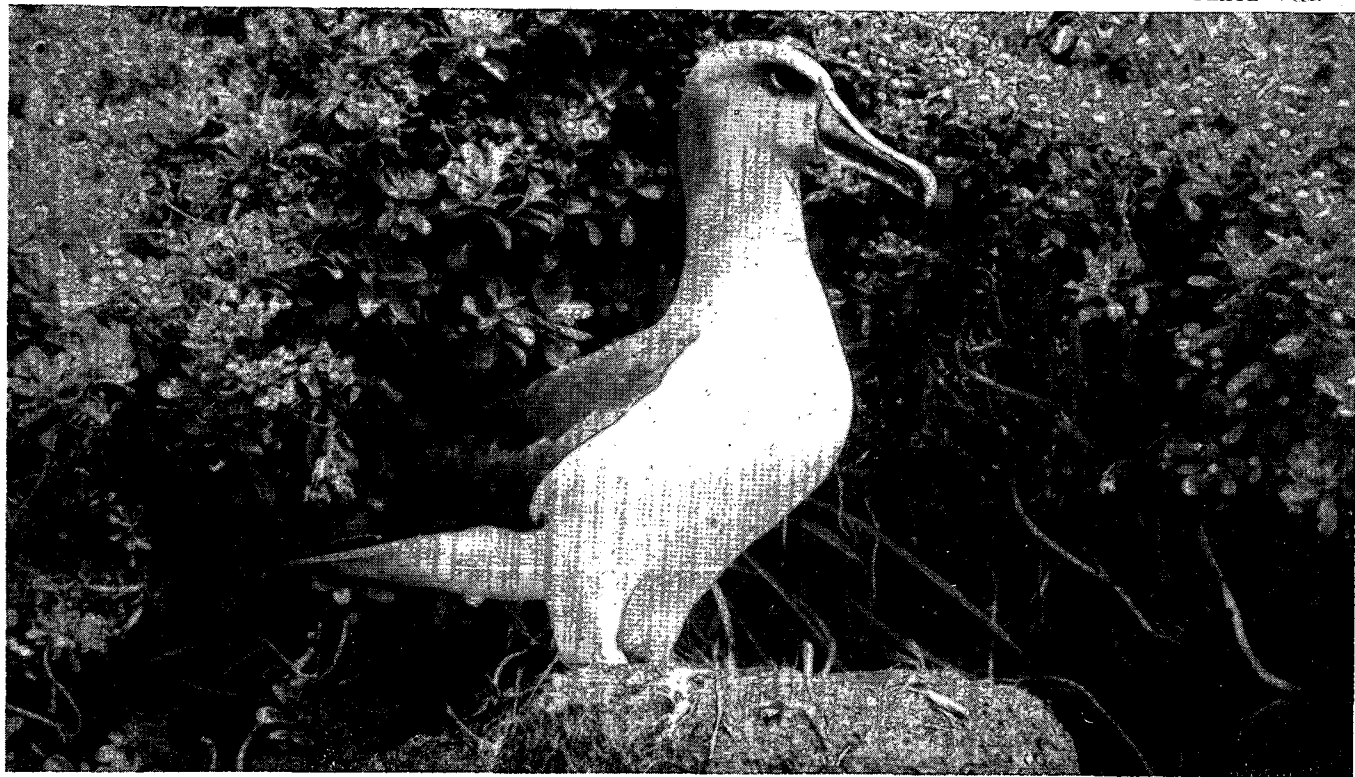


Photo: E. W. Dawson.

BULLER'S MOLLYMAWK ON EMPTY NEST, THE SISTERS, CHATHAM ISLANDS, January 29, 1954.



Showing Transition in Vegetation and Density of Birds between breeding areas of Buller's Mollymawk and Royal Albatross on the Forty-Fours. Mr. J. MacIntyre, marine biologist on the expedition, is standing amongst the Buller's Mollymawks. In the foreground are the albatrosses in the scrub of *Cotula renwickii*. February 1, 1954.

Photo: G. A. Kuog.