

## A COLONY OF BUFF-COLOURED PUKEKO.

By J. M. Cunningham, Masterton.

### THE COLONY.

Oliver (N.Z. Birds 1930, p. 346) states "the pukeko seems particularly prone to albinism," and gives details of examples, all of which show the lack of blackness in the plumage. It is of interest to record the presence of three or four abnormally plumaged birds in a colony near Masterton, and to give details of the plumage of adults and of a downy chick, apparently the first chick so described.

My attention was first drawn to this colony by Mr. S. Geary, of Masterton, who, on May 10, 1953, shot one (of three or four) buff-coloured pukeko on the property of Mr. Donald Watson, Matahiwi. This bird I deposited with the Dominion Museum, Wellington. On October 18 I visited this property and found a normal pukeko feeding four chicks, three normal and one buff. Another normal and also a buff adult were nearby, watching, and appeared to have a parental interest in the chicks. I was informed by Miss Watson that these chicks hatched on October 15, when there were two buff and either three or four normal chicks. The adults had been seen for more than a year. There were at least three, one being reported shot (in addition to that shot by Mr. Geary), and Miss Watson stated she had seen similar birds in a swamp some 2½ miles away, though, of course, these may have been the same birds. In December, 1953, the buff chick survived and there was one buff adult still present nearby, the breeding swamp having in the meantime dried up. She also believed that there were three birds connected with the nest from which the chicks hatched.

### DESCRIPTION OF BIRDS.

In the field, the bird appeared to behave normally, and fed quietly with the other blue bird. At a distance it was strongly reminiscent in colour of a khaki campbell duck. It was largely buff coloured, the primaries being whitish, and with a light mauve tinge on the breast. It was thus rather similar to the specimen described below by Dr. R. A. Falla.

### ADULT.

"Dominion Museum. No. 892. Collected J. M. Cunningham, 11 May, 1953. Weight: 2lb. 3oz. Sex: Male. Iris: Reddish-brown. Bill: Coral-red. Tarsi and toes: Dull salmon-pink. The above data are all taken from the label. In regard to plumage, I should say that it is almost completely lacking in the normal black pigment, and that the areas which are jet glossy-black in a normal bird are in this specimen dull, pale Isabelline brown. This colour is fairly uniform on the crown, cheeks, hind-neck, and mantle, but is so bleached on the exposed parts of the primaries, secondaries and tail that these appear very pale Isabelline buff. However, it should be made clear that this is a matter of bleaching, because the hidden parts of the feathers are darker. The lower breast and belly feathers are also the dark, dull Isabelline shade, but less faded than anything on the back. The under-tail coverts are the normal pure-white. This leaves only the areas that are normally indigo-blue in the species, and in this specimen they are of the lavender-violet series (Ridgway). The Ridgway reference is Plate 25, and the shade varies between 61F and 51 B. It seems likely that the same dark factor is missing right through the plumage and that its restoration or presence would have resulted in normal plumage colour. There is no trace of the "white-spotting" or so-called partial albinism, as recorded by Buller and not uncommon in other recorded specimens."

### CHICK THREE DAYS OLD.

The down was pale buff, browner on the back, with silvery hair-like tips on the head, neck, upper back and wings in the same positions as in the other three black chicks. The legs were the same pink, and the bill which was red at the base with a white tip, and with the egg-tooth still showing, was similar. The frontal plate was also similar, a pale majenta

pink, and the flesh on the crown and wings was perhaps a little pinker. The irides were mauve, the iris a pink majenta, and the pupil majenta. In these respects it differed from the three other chicks which were: irides mauve, iris dark brown, pupil dark blue.

I am indebted to Mr. Geary for first drawing my attention to these birds, to members of the Watson family for their courtesy in showing me the birds on their property, and to Dr. R. A. Falla for the description of the specimen.

**BIRDS NESTING IN GISBORNE HARBOUR.**—In 1950 there was a colony of about 300 white-fronted terns nesting on the cliffs of Tuahine Point, Gisborne. All went well until two vandals, having shot and driven away the adult birds, broke the eggs and strangled the young. Since then the terns have not attempted to nest in Gisborne until the summer of 1953-54, when a small colony of about 50 pairs nested successfully in the company of about the same number of black-billed gulls on an old groyne inside the Gisborne harbour. Boats were passing within yards of the groyne and a great number of people were fishing on the breakwater which was only 150 yards away. On January 17, 1954, nesting had passed its peak; there were then more young than eggs. The usual clutch for the gulls was two, although nests containing one or three eggs were noticed. The adults were very tame and would allow one to approach to less than two yards before they would stir from the nest. The terns laid one or two eggs on the bare concrete, in some cases, although they seemed to prefer a depression or the shelter of a plant. Some of the terns' nests were quite well made, of grass and stones. Most of the terns' nests had rings of small stones enclosing the egg or eggs. Young chicks, on the approach of danger, played "possum." The older chicks, which had left the nests, would flutter over the eight feet drop to the water, and as the danger passed would swim to a portion of the groyne which had fallen in and now sloped into the water. Here they could climb up to the nesting area again. On March 13 the nesting ground was deserted, except for an occasional resting bird.—Don Merton (15 years), Gisborne.

**BIRDS IN NORTHLAND WATERS.**—From Auckland to the North Cape in my cruise to the Three Kings, little bird life was observed. A few flocks of Buller's shearwater (*Puffinus bulleri*) and fluttering shearwater (*Puffinus gavia*) were seen. On reaching the North Cape large flocks of red-billed gulls (*Larus novae-hollandiae*) were seen. This was new to me, as during the last ten years I have seen this gull in only small numbers at the Cape. On proceeding about a mile past the Cape I saw that a colony of red-billed gulls was nesting there. The nesting area extended over about a quarter of an acre. This is the first time in ten years that I have seen the red-billed gull nesting at the North Cape and the first time in many years that I have seen it feeding in any large numbers on the east coast between Auckland and the North Cape. On arriving at the Three Kings large flocks of the red-billed gull were feeding but the general impression was that they were in slightly lesser numbers than previously. On inspecting their nesting places it was obvious that this year it had been a very early nesting season as the usual nesting areas were almost deserted. The usual flocks of fluttering shearwater and a small number of Buller's shearwater were seen, besides quite a number of diving petrel (*Pelecanoides urinatrix*), but the bad weather prevented us from staying more than one day. On our return journey, when about nine miles north of Cape Brett, I observed a small light-coloured bird approaching the stern of the yacht. At first I thought it was a red-billed gull or a tern, but as it neared the yacht I saw that it was neither. It flew very close to the yacht several times and appeared to be quite friendly and interested in it. It was easy to note the bird's colouring in detail and there is no doubt in my mind that it was a grey noddy (*Procelsterna cerulea albivitta*). This bird has only previously been reported in New Zealand waters on three occasions.—M. E. Johnson, Auckland; 12/1/54.