

AN UNRECORDED GANNETRY ON THE EAST COAST

By A. BLACKBURN

It is not to be wondered at that no gannet colonies on the East Coast between Gisborne and East Cape are included in the Census by Fleming and Wodzicki (*Notornis* 5, No. 2), for that part of the coast is little traversed by small boats sailing close inshore, one known breeding place is not visible from the mainland, and settlement nearby is non-existent. This colony has been known to the odd hardy fisherman without realisation of its importance, or even of the fact that the gannets were breeding in this place. The rocky islet containing the gannetry is impossible of access except under the most favourable conditions, and in foul ground, which requires some knowledge to avoid disaster even to a small boat.

My interest was first aroused some two or three years ago by noting from beaches near Gisborne numbers of gannets during the summer months flying northwards just before dusk. Cape Kidnappers was too far south for a return flight, and White Island too far north, and a breeding place a few miles north of Gisborne appeared to be indicated. Later inquiries from an observant Maori amateur fisherman at Hicks Bay revealed that during the breeding season, late in the day, gannets flew in a south-westerly direction. This seemed to indicate another colony on the northern part of the coast. East Island seemed a likely spot, but reliable information from Mr George Goldsmith, the nearest resident to East Cape, was to the effect that the island was only a breeding place for Flesh-footed Shearwaters and goats, and that it was eroding rapidly.

Subsequent investigations have revealed one gannetry at Moutara Point on the East Coast, and although two other likely islands further to the north have been investigated during the past season without result, I have some grounds for believing that another colony may yet be discovered somewhere north of Tokomaru Bay.

Moutara Rock

This island is 400 yards off Moutara Point at the northern end of Waihu Bay, and is three miles south of Tolaga Bay. The coastline is extremely precipitous at this point and is fairly inaccessible from the landward side. The rock has an area of about four acres and is completely bare of vegetation. There is an inshore island, separated by a dangerous channel 50 yards wide from the rock, and this island has vegetation and is a nesting place of numerous Black-backed Gulls, while a colony of Red-billed Gulls nests on a sloping rock on the point of the mainland. My first opportunity of making a visit was on 7/11/55, and in any case this was only the third occasion since the end of August that an approach to the rock in a small boat was possible, owing to surge and the lack of any sheltered landing place. Through the kindness of Mr Fred Hall, of Tatapouri, the owner of a small crayfish boat, and the expert handling of a dinghy by his brother Syd, a safe landing was made at 11 a.m. and an equally successful take-off made at 4.30 p.m.

The rock rises to about 45 feet and the surface was found to be very dusty. It is obviously swept by spray during winter gales, and thus much of the guano deposits would be removed. An accurate count of the gannets is impossible at this time of the year, owing to so much movement of the birds, but several estimates were made and averaged 230. The nesting site occupies two low hummocks and a basin in between, and is exposed to the prevailing north-easterly wind. The area occupied is about 25 yards by 10 yards. I estimated that between 80 and 90 birds were sitting close on empty nests, eggs or young, and there was much playing about with nesting materials, with other birds bringing in fresh seaweed continuously. Several males were observed treading the hens.

In September Mr Hall informed me that only 30 to 40 birds had arrived, and these appear to have occupied the northern hummock only, as several nests here contained a young bird one week old. Nests in the upper part of the basin between the hummocks contained an egg, and occasionally two,

while those in the lower part of the basin and on the south hummock were without eggs. It was noted twice that nests left unoccupied for a few moments were appropriated *in toto* by a next-door neighbour. Unattached birds were gathered mostly at the lowest end of the basin.

Continuous north-easterly weather rendered impossible any further attempts to visit the colony until 6/2/56, when a change to westerly conditions occurred. When I arrived off the rock in the early afternoon, again through the kindness and keen interest of Mr Hall, a landing was out of the question, but by 4.30 p.m., when the tide had fallen, this was successfully accomplished. The light was good for photography, both colour and black and white. A count of the young birds gave a total of 78, in all stages from the youngest three to four weeks old up to birds ready to fly, in addition to two dead chicks and four added eggs. One bird was still brooding on an egg which was probably infertile. A heavy rainstorm caused a hurried take-off at 5.45 p.m.

The following morning an easy landing was made at 6.30 a.m., and shortly afterwards one young bird took flight from a rock ledge about ten feet above the sea. It was observed for about a mile flying north-east fairly steadily, but it then seemed to waver and probably dropped into the water. It is impossible to say whether any young birds had left the colony already, but if so they would be few in number. Ten young birds which had lost their fluff and were nearly ready for flight were congregated on the northern hummock, and this approximated the number of nests made by early arrivals at the beginning of the nesting season. A further 49 young were in black and white stages with fluff, and 18 were in the white down stage.

The remains of three dead adult birds at the colony somewhat mystified me, but seemed to be explained by the discovery of a badly wounded bird, obviously shot by a heavy calibre bullet. Access to the nearest point of the mainland is only possible through a station property some miles to the south and through another several miles north, and apparently the shooting had taken place at a range of 500 yards from the mainland. The co-operation of these station owners is being sought to prevent the taking of rifles through their properties.

Otherwise the colony is almost completely free from the possibility of interference, and the rock itself is suited to unlimited expansion of the breeding ground.

Information as to the history of the colony is scanty. Mr Hall states that gannets have been seen by him on the rock for seven years past, but he cannot estimate any numbers; and Mr Norman Loisel, owner of Waihou Station, and the nearest resident, states that as a boy 30 years ago, while fishing in Waihou Bay, he used to see gannets heavy with food disappearing off Moutara Point. Inquiries have failed to show that anyone has previously landed on the rock, and the colony's history may remain obscure.

TWO NESTING COLONIES OF STEWART ISLAND SHAGS

By MAIDA L. SANSOM

On 20/11/55, with my mother, Mrs Olga Sansom, I visited a colony of Stewart Island Shags (*Phalacrocorax (Leucocarbo) carunculatus chalconotus*) on Papa-kaha, at the entrance to Bluff Harbour. This shag is a dimorphic subspecies in which the white-breasted phase has been named *huttoni* (Buller) and *stewarti* (Ogilvie-Grant).

We were accompanied ashore by Messrs C. Barwell and J. Mackintosh, of Invercargill, who took colour photographs, and Mr Maro Bradshaw, of Bluff. Mr Olaf Wiig of the pilot boat *Takitumu* remained aboard.

Papa-kaha is a low reef of rocks separated from the mainland of Tiwai Point by deep water. It is accessible only by boat, handled by experienced men. Papa-kaha is the old Maori name for these rocks. 'They were a rookery for the kind of shag known as "kaha"' (Herries Beattie). The rookery must be ancestrally old. Until 1953 Papa-kaha had been untenanted for

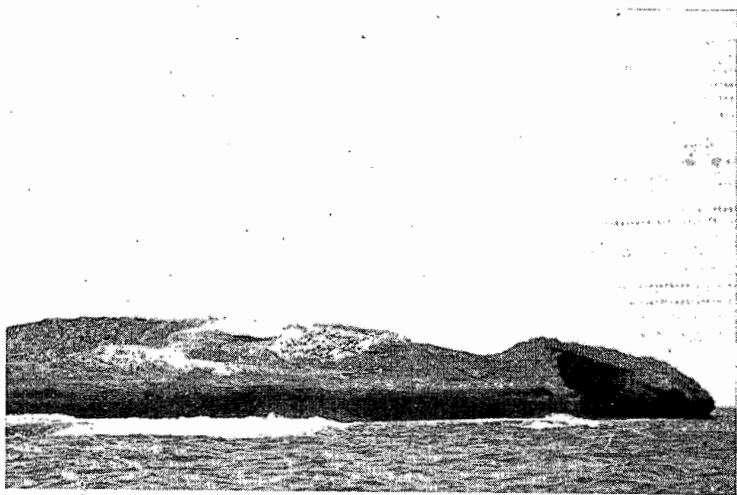


PLATE III

The Moutara Point gannetry (v. *Notornis* 7; 15, 16). Surge sweeps in under the best conditions.

General view from the island, with steep Moutara Point in background.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY A. BLACKBURN