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HEN ISLAND IN WINTER

By B. D. HEATHER

In mid-August 1953, fourteen members of the Auckland University College Field Club visited Taranga (Hen I.). Four O.S.N.Z. members, I. A. Atkinson, B. D. Heather, R. R. Moynihan and C. B. Trevarthen, were present, but, because of other scientific work and two nights and a day of continuous rain, the success, ornithologically, of the five days' visit was small.

The usual boisterous crossings to and from Leigh were made with Mr Norman Warren in the *Gunner*, and we landed in Old Woman Cove on the South Coast. Camp was sited a chain into the bush immediately east of the main stream of the Cove. This afforded a chance of comparing the merits of this and the traditional western site as I experienced it in December 1948. (Sibson, *Notornis* 3: 183-8.)

In summer, the south site should offer a more reliable landing, a central position with quick access to the main ridge once the best route is known, an abundance of water, a minimum of the enervating summer sun, and a good area for all birds.

In winter, however, this site is damp, sunless and chilly. When rain falls, the gullies quickly become raging torrents and water flows, unceasing and unchecked, down the steep, thin-soiled slopes. In fine weather the winter sun scarcely touches these south slopes and birds seem to favour the more equable conditions of the north and west sides.

We would therefore suggest that the south site be used for summer visits and the west site for winter visits.

For accounts of various scientific aspects of Taranga, see *Tane*, journal of the A.U.C.F.C., Vol. 6, 1953-54, an issue of note for students of Northland and Bay of Plenty offshore islands. This includes (pp. 20-25) a full geographical account, with map, of Taranga by G. A. Cochrane.

In the following list, the outward voyage on 17/8/53 is designated 'outward', and the return to Leigh on 23/8/53 as 'inward'.

BLUE PENGUIN

Numerous and vociferous ashore at night. Fresh dropping trails frequent on the coast, but the few holes investigated by day were empty. Outward: 5.

MOLLYMAWK (Sp ?)

Outward: 2 adults.

GIANT PETREL

Outward: 8. Inward: 3.

CAPE PIGEON

Outward: 1.

FLESH-FOOTED SHEARWATER

Outward: 1, possibly 2. Inward: 1 near Taranga.

BULLER'S SHEARWATER

None was seen, despite as careful a watch as sea conditions allowed.

SOOTY SHEARWATER

Outward: 1, possibly 2 (cf. *P. carneipes*).

FLUTTERING SHEARWATER

Very numerous both crossings, especially outward. On the night of 19/8/53 a pair was found cleaning out a burrow in the side of a steep gully above the camp.

NORTH ISLAND ALLIED SHEARWATER (*P. assimilis haurakiensis*)

The burrows of this species were hard to find. Burrows examined by day yielded only the baleful glare of *Pt. macroptera*. By night, *assimilis* could be found, mainly by tracing its distinctive ground call, and pairs seemed to be scattered well apart on Taranga's south slopes. The few burrows seen were deeply tunnelled into steep gully-sides or beneath a tree. Two, though occupied, had neither egg nor chick. However, two eggs were found deserted amid the fern on parts of the main ridge. Mr E. G. Turbott gives the measurements of these, now in the Auckland Museum, as 55.7 x 36.1 mm., and c. 56.5 (end of egg damaged) x 35.8 mm. From these meagre data there can unfortunately be no assessment made of the stage of the species' breeding cycle.

In appearance, *P. assimilis* could scarcely be confused with *P. gavia* on the breeding grounds. Its daintier build, black bill and the attractive blueness of its dark plumage, legs and feet, contrast with the drab brown of *gavia*'s plumage and bill, and the pink of its feet and more robust legs.

The ground call of *assimilis*, equally as loud and harsh as that of *Pt. macroptera*, is very similar in form and pitch to the flight call of *P. gavia*. A call indistinguishable from *gavia*'s was heard very infrequently in the sky every night and was assumed at first to be that of *assimilis*, especially in view of the latter's ground call. However the subsequent discovery of at least one pair of *gavia* already on Taranga left the question undecided. All other flight calls were positively identified as those of *Pt. macroptera*.

GREY-FACED PETREL

Abundant. Its burrows extended from the highest peaks to the boundary of bush and shore. Though rarely reaching the density of, say, *Pt. cooki* on Little Barrier or *P. bulleri* on Poor Knights, its burrows occupied all the good sites. Particularly favoured was the soil at the foot of bluffs, in *Astelia* and flax communities, and among boulders and the roots of big trees. They were thus distributed throughout the lower slopes where either beach or cliff is handy. In higher regions they were confined to the neighbourhood of those peaks, bluffs and rocks which pierce the bush canopy.

Burrows contained all stages from no egg to young in first down, but too few could be examined to give a valid picture of the breeding situation. One egg had just hatched on 13/8/53 and another was hatching on 21/8/53.

The huge evening gathering of petrels off the shore seemed entirely of *macroptera*. As the light failed, the birds, as they began sweeping close over beach and headland, were often in small groups. One such group of five birds landed together on a pebble beach, but, disturbed by the observer, turned and, without 'taxiing', flew straight out again.

Macroptera has two calls in its usual repertoire. A loud, harsh, two-syllabled staccato call uttered in flight and on the ground; and the familiar 'oi' of the Maori which is soft, one-syllabled and inaudible when one is within sound of the surf. This is not uttered on the ground.

WHITE-FACED STORM PETREL

Very numerous both crossings, especially outward, from Pakiri to Sail Rock. Often in groups of up to 10.

DIVING PETREL

As for *P. marina*, save that no grouping was noted.

GANNET

A few adults on both crossings, often off the Taranga coast.

PIED SHAG

The colony in Old Woman Cove was not closely inspected, but young were being fed.

WHITE-THROATED SHAG

One reported once at west landing.

BLACK-BACKED GULL

17th: 1 adult and 1 one-year-old in the Cove. 20th: 1 three-year-old in the Cove. Inward: 1 adult, 1 two-year-old and 1 one-year-old well to sea.

RED-BILLED GULL

Outward: 1 near Sail Rock.

CASPIAN TERN

Two singles and a pair were recorded on different days.

WHITE-FRONTED TERN

Small parties of up to five occasionally seen round the island.

HARRIER

Two, possibly three, present.

N.Z. PIGEON

Seldom seen save on the north side in fine weather when they were very conspicuous. The evening aerial display of summer was seen on the south side once only. One bird was disturbed on the ground.

KAKA

Up to four at once frequently heard and seen in all areas. On two moonless nights they were heard in flight. The population seems unlikely to be much greater than six.

RED-FRONTED PARRAKEET

Infrequently seen or heard by contrast with the apparent large numbers seen in January 1948. They were several times disturbed on the ground.

MOREPORK

Barely noticed in view of the petrel din at night.

KINGFISHER

Recorded in Old Woman Cove and at the east and west ends.

FANTAIL

Very few seemed present in most areas. Often feeding over the rocks at low tide.

PIED TIT

Numerous on the north side; elsewhere inconspicuous. Full call infrequent, often with a trill at the end.

GREY WARBLER

Rarely seen and heard on the north side.

PIPIT

Seen on the south shore from east to west ends. One seen once on a main-ridge outcrop.

BELLBIRD

Very numerous, particularly on north and west sides.

TUI

Numerous, particularly on north side and in the flowering kowhais. Neither Bellbirds or Saddlebacks were seen to give attention to kowhai flowers.

SILVEREYE

Scarce. Noted three times only; one of these a flock of six. Beak, wings and feathers of one found, with *Sideroxylon* seed cases, in a disused rat hole.

SADDLEBACK

From the uncertain evidence of sound and conspicuousness, this appeared by far the commonest diurnal species. Heard from the peaks of the summit and

the main ridge, its call pealed from all parts of the canopy below, and birds were encountered wherever one went. Mostly in parties of two or three, they were spending much time busily examining the trees or vigorously tearing off pohutukawa bark in search of insect life. One bird was seen to feed another repeatedly, once with a large larva, while a third bird took no part in these proceedings.

INTRODUCED BIRDS

Blackbird, Thrush, Hedge Sparrow were noted, mainly on the Manuka-Kanuka slope north of the lighthouse. All were recorded on the south side and Blackbird on the north. Hedge Sparrows were heard in full song.

DOES THE LITTLE TERN (*Sterna albifrons*) REACH NEW ZEALAND?

By H. R. McKENZIE and R. B. SIBSON

Although we have been visiting the west coast of the Firth of Thames almost monthly since the winter of 1941, it was not till January 1949 that any small terns comparable in size with the Fairy Tern (*S. nereis*) or the Little Tern (*S. albifrons*) were seen. The Fairy Tern is known to be one of the rarest breeding birds in New Zealand, maintaining a precarious hold on one stretch of coast in Northland where the population may not exceed six pairs. Since the Fairy Tern does not breed in the Firth of Thames, it was at first assumed that the small terns which appeared there from time to time were wandering non-breeding birds of this species. When they were distantly seen, the colour of the bill could not be distinguished; when they were seen closely and the bill was seen to be dark and the crown white or mottled, they were thought to be immature Fairy Terns. However, as the number of recorded occurrences increased and we had several opportunities of examining these small terns on the ground at ranges of 20 to 30 yards, we began to find reasons for doubting whether these birds were indeed Fairy Terns. At the time of writing we have not yet been able to identify *Sterna nereis* positively by an all-yellow bill in the Firth of Thames. On the other hand we have on at least four occasions examined in the field small terns apparently in the full adult breeding dress of *S. albifrons*.

These small terns resort to the south-western corner of the Firth of Thames where there are wide mud flats and they can fish in the shallow water along the tideline, especially at the mouths of muddy creeks and rivers, Pukorokoro, Kairito, Waitakaruru and Piako. We have not seen them north of the Miranda beaches and their favourite haunt seems to be near the mouth of the Waitakaruru, which owing to its inaccessibility has not been visited by us nearly as frequently as the rest of the Miranda coast. When big tides force the waders, for the most part Godwits, Knots and Wrybills, to leave Waitakaruru for the Kairito shellbank, at the northern end of what is known to local bird-watchers as 'Wrybill Reach', or the Miranda Lagoon, these small terns habitually go with them, so that their visits to these two well-watched localities as a general rule coincide only with the highest tides.

Since 1949 small terns have been studied with interest in the Firth of Thames by many observers — Mr and Mrs Prickett, Miss N. Macdonald, Miss L. M. Burnside, Miss A. J. Goodwin, Miss M. Sansom, Rev. R. J. Fenton, Rev. W. M. Garner, M. J. S. Black, O. Cheesman, J. C. Davenport, A. G. Gorbey, B. D. Heather, F. Murray, W. W. Renouf, E. G. Turbott, D. A. Urquhart, B. D. Bell and D. H. Brathwaite.

LIST OF REPORTED OCCURRENCES

Date	Number	Place	Observer(s)
31/1/49	2	Piako rivermouth	H.R.McK.
2/12/51	2	Kairito Creek	E.G.T., J.C.D.
15/12/51	1	Waitakaruru	D.A.U.
19/1/52	1	Waitakaruru	H.R.McK., O.C., R.J.F.
22/2/53	3	Pukorokoro Ck.	N.M., R.B.S.