

NOTORNIS

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SOME NOTES ON MUTTONBIRDING IN THE NORTH ISLAND

By W. J. PHILLIPPS

During the period 1919-1924 odd notes were collected on the occurrence of muttonbirds breeding on Mount Pihanga not far from Lake Rotoaira. At this time it was customary for small groups of Maoris to visit selected spots each year and secure muttonbirds. However, this procedure had been vetoed by the authorities and was then regarded as quite illegal, so there was no opportunity of securing notes on the method used, though a small number of muttonbirds was collected surreptitiously for several years following this date. Later on, Mr Raureti Te Huia of Te Awamutu stated that he had had experience of taking muttonbirds in the Waikato district. For this temporary round houses, termed whare patu-titi, were built for the titi hunters. Adult muttonbirds were taken in November on the Kawhia coast along the Paeroa ridge. On a suitable night a fire would be lit on the ridge and piled high with green manuka. Muttonbirds flying over the ridge would be overcome with the smoke and would land in hundreds to be killed by the Maoris below. This was the custom last century, but is not carried out today. Birds were first plucked around a fire termed ahi-titi and then stored in a poha (seaweed vessel). Similar records have been received from Taranaki.

As the result of a visit to Te Kaha in January 1951, the following notes were collected:

Each alternate year in November it is customary for several parties of Te Kaha Maoris to visit White Island to take the young of the Grey-faced Petrel (*Pterodroma macroptera*). No visits were made in the summer of 1949-50; so towards the end of the year 1950 four parties of from thirty to forty people visited the island at intervals. Each person is said to have taken up to 200 birds. Taking 150 as the average number secured by each of thirty-five participants, we have a total of over 5,250 young birds taken in the 1950 season.

The landing place on White Island is usually Mata-wiwi; but Pahou and Poroporo are other landing places sometimes used. These three localities cover the main areas where muttonbirds breed. Originally the old people departed from the mainland in canoes during the night. This was to take advantage of a morning breeze which is fairly constant in this locality. As the breeze dies down the muttonbirders are within easy reach of the island. At present 4 a.m. is the usual time of departure.

To avoid misfortune no one may mention anything associated with the muttonbirds or their young during the voyage. This would spell disaster. Also fatal would be a full look at Paepaeaotea, another island north of the main island. After the slightest glance at this dreaded spot one must steadfastly look elsewhere. Though November is the correct month to take young Grey-faced Petrels, they may also be secured up to the end of the first week in December and sometimes later. The young are termed kuia and live in burrows constructed by the parents. The adults are titi. My informants state that on White Island there are no flies, spiders, ants, sand-flies or mosquitoes. Lizards are also absent. Maoris never stay the night on the island if they can avoid it. All work required is carried out in the hours of daylight and a departure made at 4 p.m. at the latest.

I must acknowledge with best thanks information received from Mr and

Mrs P. R. Ranapia (Te Kaha); also from Messrs Ngamotu Tukaki (Te Kaha) and Mr Tatana Wharepapa (Maungaroa).

Late last century many muttonbirds (*P. griseus*) bred high up on Kapiti Island. Waikanae Maoris who had mostly joined the Te Whiti movement were accustomed to send a group of young men to Kapiti to get thirty or forty pigeons and as many young muttonbirds as possible. These latter were placed in kelp containers. Thereafter Wi Parata, who was the leading chief, together with his family and adherents, would journey to Parihaka with their gifts and take part in the services of Te Whiti. The late Mrs U. Webber, who supplied the main information, was a daughter of Wi Parata. She stated that on one occasion she had seen 400 muttonbirds taken. In this instance they were preserved in a cask.

A leading authority on Maori subjects in the Bay of Islands is Mr S. W. Maioha, of Russell. He states that Piercy Island, Cape Brett, is the main breeding place of 'muttonbirds', a loose term which here certainly means the Grey-faced Petrel, in the Bay of Islands. Here last century and early this century, muttonbirders could rely on collecting anything up to 500 young birds each season. Piercy Island has precipitous sides and can be scaled only at one point where selected experts make the ascent. Smaller colonies of muttonbirds may be found on a number of other outside islands near the entrance to Bay of Islands, the Pine Pinnacles or Nine Pins being of most importance.

Before European contact, the opening date for taking muttonbirds was decided by the tohunga; but later this date became fixed for 15 November. Much ritual, now fallen into disuse, attended this opening ceremony, which lasted for a full day. It was described by my informant as a Rahui ceremony. The general purpose was to lift the tapu from the reserve of birds which had not been visited since the previous year, and made both fowlers and birds 'noa' or common. First fruits were carefully put aside for offering to the gods.

For many years there has been a decline in the number of birds taken. The young men of today will rarely brave the precipitous path which leads to the top of Piercy Island. Also the date 15 November has lost its significance and such muttonbirds as are collected are usually taken late in October. Modern parties are armed with spades etc. and gouge out the burrows, so that birds have difficulty in finding breeding places in the next season.

Another informant at Paihia, Bay of Islands, Mrs L. Yorke, states that her people formerly received their supply of muttonbirds from the 'Nine Pinnacles', but for the last ten years none had been collected. As far as her family were concerned, the last young birds were taken in 1942. These were collected by her son-in-law in response to an urgent request from an uncle who was nearing death and wished to taste again the food he so much relished in his younger days.

At Hokianga Harbour so-called muttonbirds were also taken. These were given the name of 'taiko' by the Maoris, and were said to live in holes beneath trees in high inaccessible places. Dogs were used to drag out the chicks. Before killing it was said to be important that each one should be held upside down to drain out the oil from the stomach, otherwise they were useless for food. These young were said to be greatly esteemed, but none are now taken in that locality. This information was supplied by Mrs Whina Cooper, formerly of Panguru.

On a recent visit to the East Cape district, March 1957, enquiry was made into the incidence of mainland breeding of muttonbirds. Mr Tom S. Hovell, a surveyor, who lives at Te Araroa, informs us that the largest breeding centre is on Maungaroa, a precipitous hill across the Awatere stream from Te Araroa. Approximately 100 birds breed here each year. No information is available on numbers taken by local Maoris, though some young birds are known to be taken each year on Te Koau Point, which is a hill on the north of the road between Te Araroa and Hicks Bay. Small groups of muttonbirds may

be found nesting in numbers from two to six on rocky seaward localities southward to Gisborne.

[Mr Phillipps' notes draw attention to the need for collecting, before it is too late, all possible information about muttonbirds which bred or are still breeding on the coastal headlands or inland in the ranges of the North and South Islands.

The term 'muttonbird' is a loose one; and on the outer islands of the Hauraki Gulf and the Bay of Plenty certainly once included as well as the Grey-faced Petrel (*Pt. macroptera*), the Black Petrel (*Pr. parkinsoni*) which was taken on Little Barrier, the Flesh-footed Shearwater (*P. carneipes*) and not improbably Buller's Shearwater (*P. bulleri*), the Fluttering Shearwater (*P. gavia*) and Cook's Petrel (*Pt. cooki*). But if the season for taking the young muttonbirds were November, the victims would in the main be Grey-faced Petrels, with perhaps an occasional Allied Petrel (*P. assimilis*) getting into the bag along with adults of some of the other species mentioned.

It would be interesting to know what were the adult muttonbirds 'taken in November on the Kawhia coast along the Paeroa ridge'. The Grey-faced Petrel is not now known to breed south of Manukau heads. On the Awhitu peninsula S. C. and V. M. Rutherford have searched in vain for evidence of breeding, though the cliffs and cover are suitable.

A careful exploration of old known nesting places and the critical examination of nearby Maori middens might yield bones which would enable the muttonbirds of Pihanga, the Paeroa ridge and other traditional inland sites to be identified. — Ed.]

CLASSIFIED SUMMARISED NOTES

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