

## SHORT NOTES

### BLACK-BACKED GULL — A GANNET PREDATOR

Predation by Black-backed Gulls (*Larus dominicanus*) on the eggs of gannets (*Sula bassana serrator*) was noted on 6 and 7/11/57 when, together with Mr. Nat Beatus, we were carrying out observations at the Main and Black Reef gannetries, Cape Kidnappers, Hawke's Bay.

At each gannetry there were usually two or three adult gulls, either flying above, or roosting on the ledges and rocks at the outskirts of the colonies. In most instances of predation observed, the gull swooped on the unattended nest, picked up the egg in its bill, and carried it outside the nesting area where it broke the shell and ate the contents. However, on the Black Reef the eggs were not removed from the more isolated nests on the outskirts of a colony, but eaten at the nest (Fig. 4b). One of the gulls at Black Reef dropped the egg during the short flight from the nest to the edge of the colony. At the main gannetry a gull, which for some time had been hovering above the nesting area, dropped suddenly on to an unattended nest near the middle of the crowded colony, picked up the egg firmly in its bill and carried it successfully to a ledge where it was promptly consumed. In this manner the same bird robbed two nests within ten minutes.

Black-backed Gulls are known to feed on eggs of various birds, especially terns (*Oliver, 1955, p. 311*), but the present report describes what we believe to be the first instances of their predation on gannet eggs in New Zealand. At Cape Kidnappers, Black-backed Gulls nest on the cliffs west of Black Reef and on the cliffs of the cape just east of the gannetry, and it appears that these birds have acquired a new habit and are utilising a hitherto unused source of food. Similar predation by Herring Gulls (*Larus a. argentatus*) on the eggs of North Atlantic gannets (*S. b. bassana*) has been reported (*Perry, 1948, p. 194*).

Two aspects of this predation are of some general interest. Firstly, the indifference of the gannets nesting adjacent to the unattended nest which is being robbed. These birds paid no attention to the intruder except when the gull occasionally approached within pecking distance.

The second point is the origin of this apparently new behaviour pattern. Mr. Allan Cochrane, who manages the sheep station adjoining Cape Kidnappers sanctuary, reported (pers. comm.) seeing a gull steal an egg from the Plateau gannetry on two occasions during the 1956/57 breeding season. During the 1957/58 season the predation by gulls at all three gannetries near the Cape became common and they have also been observed collecting gannet spews at the edge of the Plateau gannetry. Extensive observations on the behaviour of the gannet have been carried out every season since 1945 by the authors; never before have Black-backed Gulls been observed taking eggs, although they have always been present in the vicinity of Cape Kidnappers. The 1957/58 nesting season was also the first occasion that predation was observed by Mr. R. Williams and the N.Z. Junior Wildlife Wardens, who have visited the gannetries regularly since 1955. Mr. Williams suggested ("*The Dominion*," 7/1/58) that this predation on gannet eggs by gulls

may become a factor seriously affecting the gannet population at Cape Kidnappers and has obtained permission to shoot four gulls. It remains to be seen whether this measure will have any effect in checking this new behaviour in the gull population.

These observations suggest that a single bird first adopted this behaviour in 1956/57 season and as other gulls learned the habit, it became more prevalent and widespread in the following year.

Finally, it may be relevant to mention that a number of Red-billed Gulls (*Larus novaehollandiae*) at the gannetries of White Island (Wodzicki and Robertson, 1958) and at Mohuki gannetry, Great Barrier Island (P. A. S. Stein *in lit.*), seem to subsist during the gannets' nesting season on the regurgitations of the birds. However, although Red-billed Gulls are present, this behaviour does not occur at either Horuhoru or Cape Kidnappers.

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#### STATUS OF RIFLEMAN IN HILLSIDE SCRUB LAND OF WELLINGTON DISTRICT

The late W. R. B. Oliver's work (*N.Z. Birds*, Second Edition, 1955, p. 448) has left the impression that the Rifleman (*Acanthisitta chloris*) may be seen occasionally in the gorse and broom wastes on hillsides of the Wellington Peninsula. The statement refers, however, to an observation of two Rifleman in gorse and broom thickets on the roadside of the Mangaroa hill, near Upper Hutt, by R. H. D. Stidolph on 10/6/33. The same observer has recorded Rifleman, in addition, not so long ago in the small domain which overlooks the railways yards at Petone. For myself, I have recorded the species likewise from scrub land on an Upper Hutt hillside. The date of observation was 27/10/57, and the spot a point covered with much gorse and cassinia scrub and a few small bush relics, not far from the confluence of the Wakatikei and Hutt Rivers.

However, the Rifleman does not appear to frequent the many small bush relics and extensive gorse and broom wastes of the Wellington Peninsula proper. I did not record it there between 1938-56, though I spent much spare time during this period exploring the district.

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**Top** — LITTLE EGRET (*E. garzetta*) and BLACK SHAG (*P. carbo*) at Matata lagoon, Bay of Plenty, winter 1957. [Photo by F. C. Kinsky]

**Bottom** — Black-backed gull taking an egg from a gannet nest on Chimney Rock, Black Reef gannetry, Cape Kidnappers. This egg was actually not removed but later eaten at the nest.

[Photo by S. N. Beatus]