

NANKEEN NIGHT-HERONS AT BLENHEIM

On 4/5/58 I was asked to identify a pair of unusual birds which had been living in some trees on the property of Mrs. C. E. Eyles, Budge Street, Blenheim, for some months. One bird had been present from at least March, but it was only recently that it was discovered that two were present. However, it is likely that the pair was present throughout. It was about midday when I called and we located the birds in some large trees at the back of the property on the banks of the Opawa River. One was in a tall walnut and was perched almost at the top but inside the leaf canopy. The other was lower down in an elm. Neither tree was actually overhanging the water. I took a description of the birds and confirmed their identity by reference to Oliver (1930). Both were immature Nankeen Night Herons (*Nycticorax caledonicus*).

The bird was obviously a heron and appeared to be approximately the same size as the White-faced Heron but the neck looked shorter in relation to the body than in that species. The crown of the head and nape were black. The bill was black on the upper mandible and horn coloured on the lower. There was a patch of lime green at the base of the bill and in front of the eye, which appeared to be bare. The iris was pale yellow. The upper surface was a rich fawn-brown and the feathers of the wings were tipped with a buff spot which extended in a thin line up the shaft of the feather. This was seen on a feather picked up under the trees. This gave the folded wings a mottled appearance. The under surface was a pale buffish shade and the fawn of the upper surface blended into this on the neck. In one of the birds this was more prominent and the sides of the neck were distinctly fawnish. The under surface of the wings was also buff in the one bird seen in flight. The legs were pale lemon yellow.

The following description of behaviour was obtained by conversation with Mrs. Eyles and her daughter. The birds spent the day roosting and dozing with the bill but not the head tucked under the wing. They kept an alert watch on anyone below the trees but would not move unless approached closely, when they would fly to another perch not far away. At dusk they were heard to make a croaking noise similar to that of the White-faced Heron, but not so consistently. The birds have been seen to fly down to the river edge at dusk and to return on the wing from down stream in the morning.

I called again on Mrs. Eyles on 3/6/58 to find that the herons had moved from their property on the night of 28/5/58, which had been a boisterous night with a strong wind from the north-west. This had stripped all the leaves off the trees used for roosting and thus rendered them unsuitable for the birds. On 2/6/58 the birds had been relocated in some evergreen trees a few hundred yards down stream. Mrs. Eyles had received a letter from a boy (David Mudge) in Wellington who claimed to have seen one of these herons in January on the Taylor River at the Percy Street foot bridge (Blenheim) during his holiday. I took his address to check this on my return to Wellington.

I called on David Mudge and he told me that on January 26th he had seen a heron with rich plumage and with two large plumes trailing from the back of its head fly past downstream in a very purposeful manner. He said that the colour was much brighter than that given in the newspaper description. He had recognised the heron

as a stranger and had checked his description with Oliver and other books. He had not said much about it as he thought he would not be believed. After the article had appeared in the paper he had written to Mrs. Eyles on his own initiative. I found he had a good knowledge of birds and I think his observation was correct, as he is familiar with the other herons. His record throws quite a different slant on what may have been the position. It is now possible that the two herons recorded are not two vagrants from across the Tasman but the progeny of a successful New Zealand mating.

B. D. BELL



A NEST OF THE BLACK STILT

In a season which has been characterised by the repeated flooding of nesting-sites of the sea- and shore-birds which migrate to the riverbeds of Otago and Canterbury, it is satisfying to be able to report the successful hatching of a clutch of the somewhat rare Black Stilt (*Himantopus novaezealandiae*).

On 17/11/57 a pair was seen on the Orari riverbed, near Geraldine, South Canterbury, i.e. about 14 miles, in a direct line, from the seacoast. Several pairs of Black-billed Gulls, Pied Oystercatchers, Pied Stilts, and Banded Dotterels were also in the area; and, judging by the agitated calling, many were nesting or preparing to nest.

The Black Stilts were particularly ferocious, swooping at a visitor continually and, when this failed to have the desired effect, feigning injury near the water's edge. In their anger they chased off other birds. After a search for an hour or so, the nest was found on a shingle-bar about five yards from the nearest water. It was merely a shallow depression of the river-sand between two largish stones, and lined with a few pieces of dry grass and twigs. The four eggs were neatly arranged with their narrower ends to the centre. In colour the background was pale fawnish, with dark brown blotches superimposed on pale purplish spots and blotches. Sizes were 43.5 x 31.9, 42.6 x 31.5, 44.5 x 31.6, 45.2 x 32.3 mm.

The appearance of the adults agreed with the description given in Oliver, the bill being noticeably longer than that of the Pied; also the legs appeared to be a paler pink than those of the Pied while the call seemed to be louder and deeper in pitch than that of the Pied.

The 25th to 28th November were very wet days, after which the river was in flood; the bed considerably altered and many nests of other birds were washed out. However, the four eggs of the Black Stilt were apparently on high enough shingle not to be affected and on 1/12/57 the four young had appeared, and seemed to be three to four days old. They were squatting on a sandy patch at the nest site beside some flood debris (dead gorse) and were particularly well camouflaged. On the dorsal side they were mottled fawns with darker brownish-black markings on the crown, nape and back, more or less in two lines on the back. The ventral surface was pale greyish-white, the bill slaty-black, iris hazel brown, legs fawnish-pink; three pink toes, slightly webbed at their bases.

On the following day, and on subsequent visits, the young were not seen, and were probaly hiding among the shingle, for the parents continued yapping noisy threats from overhead.

P. CHILD