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WELCOME SWALLOWS NESTING IN NORTHLAND — A NEW BREEDING BIRD FOR NEW ZEALAND

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Two pairs of Welcome Swallows (*Hirundo neoxena*) have been found nesting in Northland, one pair at Awanui and the other a few miles away at Paparore.

On 22/10/58 I received a message from a fisherman, Mr. P. Shean of Awanui, who was working on his launch which was moored in the river about forty yards below the bridge. For several days he had observed a pair of birds with swallow tails flying in and out from under the bridge; and on investigating, he found that they had a mud-and-straw nest stuck to the vertical edge of the inner stringer and in it were newly hatched chicks.

As the Welcome Swallow has been reported to me from several localities near here over the past few years, I thought that it would probably be these birds, and so it proved to be. Away back in the 1920's I myself had a Welcome Swallow under observation at intervals for more than a week, and about the same time one was shot at Herekino, about fifteen miles from here, the wings being displayed in the office window of the local press, which at that time was "The Northlander."

On October 23rd I visited the nest which Mr. Shean had reported, looked at the chicks and watched the parents for some time as they fed their young. The nest was placed within six feet of the end of the bridge, and about seven feet from the ground. It was only a matter of stepping out of the car and walking under the bridge to see it. Although this is a busy main highway, carrying a lot of heavy motor traffic, the birds do not take the slightest notice of it. At one stage one of the birds was sitting preening itself on a wire a few feet off the edge of the bridge when a heavy cream-lorry, laden with cans and making plenty of noise, rattled over the bridge; but the bird took no notice. As the bridge is a wooden structure, when heavy vehicles pass over it there is considerable vibration, which must go on all day. It is therefore somewhat puzzling how the birds were able to get the mud to 'stay put.' There are signs that they first attempted to build about two feet from the present nest. Apparently they chose the end of the bridge in preference to any other part because the vibration there was less. Nearer the middle the nest would have been over the water and safe from interference.

After I was first shown the nest, I made periodic visits. On November 3rd, the three chicks had grown like mushrooms and fully

taxed the nest accommodation. They were covered with blue-black pin feathers, with some of the usual earlier downy portion still remaining. The parents were catching fairly high-flying insects and visiting the nest frequently.

The three young took their first flight on or about November 7th, but returned to the nest to rest. On the morning of November 10th, when I visited the bridge, they exploded from the nest and flew confidently with their parents, before resting to preen on nearby wires. The fledging period was therefore 17 or 18 days.

On the evening of 3/11/58 I had a ring from Mr. C. McConnel, the schoolmaster at Paparore, whose school is situated near L. Ngatu, a pool beside the road between Waipapakauri and the Ninety Mile Beach.

About a chain and a half from the lake-edge is a small wooden platform 15' x 8' used by boatmen, a rickety structure three to four feet above the water. In mid-October, while some of the children who use the platform a lot were bathing, they noticed two strange birds flying in and out under the platform; and when they looked closer, they found a nest containing one egg, which one of the boys promptly took. Next day he returned to the nest and found that another egg had been laid. This he also took, but in reaching up out of the water he detached the nest. Fortunately, he had not broken either of the eggs and the nest, too, was undamaged. Both eggs and nest were given to Mr. McConnel, who gladly passed them on to me.

On November 3rd the youngsters were again bathing and noticed that the swallows were building again in the same place. When I visited the spot at 9 a.m. on November 4th, I was able to watch both birds at close range for more than half an hour. Both were working hard. They were gathering mud from the lake-edge, flying to the same place each time, hovering for a few seconds three feet or so above the ground, then diving down without alighting and scooping a mouthful of mud, after which they returned to the site of the nest. After several trips they flew further afield and out of my sight either to get a snack or to gather grass-straw to mix with the mud. On these trips they would be away four or five minutes; and as their flight is so rapid, I could not see whether they carried any straw or not. I am not at all optimistic about their second nest and doubt whether it has a better chance of success than the first. The children have been asked not to interfere with it nor to loiter about the platform too long. A flock of Red-billed Gulls frequents the lake. Mrs. McConnel has seen some of them chasing the swallows, without apparently upsetting them very much.

The nest and eggs from L. Ngatu have been placed in the Auckland War Memorial Museum. The eggs, which measure 17.5 x 14 m.m., are white, peppered with dark spots most thickly above the widest part.