

THE ISLANDS OF GISBORNE, EAST COAST

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So far as we can ascertain, there are no ornithological records of any of the islands of the East Coast from East Cape to Mahia Peninsula, with the exception of the Gannet colony on Moutara Rock (*Notornis* VII, 15-16). Prevailing north-easterly winds and consequent heavy surge render these islands impossible of access at most times, but they are easily approachable in the comparatively rare periods of calm during or following a westerly blow.

In November, 1959, we set out to make a survey of as many of the fifteen islands as we could land on, commencing with the one we considered would be the most difficult of all, viz. East Island, lying two miles off East Cape. Conditions, except for the date, appeared favourable on leaving Te Araroa on Friday, 13th November, with boat and outboard on a tractor for transport along the beach to East Cape. On arrival at the Cape, however, a north-west wind of almost gale force was blowing, and this combined with a nasty tide-rip, rendered a crossing to the island inadvisable. We were able to assess the island from East Cape lighthouse through our binoculars, and to count numbers of goats grazing on steep grassy slopes. It is bare of other vegetation owing to the depredations of the goats, which were introduced when the lighthouse was situated on the island up to 1929. A resident near East Cape, Mr. George Goldsmith, said (in litt.) that he last visited the island in 1931, and from our enquiries no one has been on it since then. He stated that the only birds then nesting there were Flesh-footed Shearwaters and that Tuataras were formerly present, but had disappeared in 1914.

On 16th November, we began working islands farther south, and set out below our findings for each of the islands visited:

Motuheka Island. This is a small islet lying at the northern end of Tolaga Bay, and has extremely steep slopes of papa rock which are difficult to scale, while the dominant shrub is introduced boxthorn, which is impenetrable in places. There are, however, considerable areas of coastal flax, patches of *muehlenbeckia*, and some flourishing kowhais, hebe, tutu and ngaio. The commonest herb is a brassica, which local legend states is descended from cabbage seed sown on the island by Captain Cook. The first sign of petrels was the corpse of a Fluttering Shearwater found on a boxthorn, a thorn having pierced the web. Later an adult and a well-grown chick were found in a burrow, and a number of this species was heard leaving the island at 4 a.m. Grey-faced Petrel were also present, a three-quarter grown chick being found in a burrow, and several burrows in use were also observed. Large dark shearwaters were seen and heard coming in after 9 p.m., but as we were unable to find their burrows they could not be identified other than that they were either *P. carneipes* or *P. griseus*. We estimated that the island contained about 200 burrows in all, about half being those of Fluttering Shearwater. Motuheka is a roosting place of thousands of House Sparrows and tens of thousands of Starlings. Other species observed were:— Northern Blue Penguin coming ashore during the night in small numbers; Northern Oystercatcher, 2 heard calling from

the reef at night; Banded Dotterel, 1 heard from the reef; Black-backed Gull, 1 nest with eggs; White-eye; Song Thrush; Hedge Sparrow; Harrier; and Arctic Skua, 2 seen off-shore.

Moutara Rock. A visit was made to the Gannet colony, and a count showed a substantial increase since 1955. The number of nests was c. 180 compared with 80 to 90 previously, and the total population c. 500 including 100+ unemployed birds, compared with a previous 230.

Moutara Island. This lies inshore from Moutara Rock, and is clothed principally with low taupata scrub and coastal flax. Northern Blue Penguins were found occupying burrows under the taupata and in the heavy grass cover. The nest of a Reef Heron was found on a ledge 40 feet above sea-level under taupata scrub. It contained a fully-grown young bird with a little down still adhering to the head. Black-backed Gulls had nests at all stages from construction to newly-hatched young, and numbered about 20.

Pourewa (Spring's) Island. This large island of about 150 acres lies at the southern end of Tolaga Bay, and has precipitous seaward faces and gentler slopes to the west. Much of it is covered with tall fescue, but bracken fern is spreading, and there are considerable patches of flax and second growth. Small numbers of petrel burrows were observed at the northern and southern ends of the island, and two Sooty or Flesh-footed Shearwaters were heard at night in the vicinity of the northern burrows. Those at the southern end appeared to belong to Grey-faced Petrels. Numbers of Northern Blue Penguins were heard coming ashore during the night. Other species seen or heard were:— Reef Heron 1; Harrier 1; Northern Oystercatcher 1; black; Shining Cuckoo 1; Morepork 1; Grey Warbler 1; Fantail 1; Pipit 1; White-eye 1; Hedge Sparrow common; Blackbird 7; Chaffinch 1; Goldfinch small numbers; Yellowhammer very common; Starling very common; White-backed Magpie 1. Black-backed Gulls were nesting all round the island on headlands and detached stacks; and Rock Pigeons were reported by Mr. Fred Hall, who has a shack on the island, to be in caves on the seaward side.

Haystacks. These stacks lie off the northern end of Pourewa Island but a landing proved impossible owing to heavy surge. They looked intensely interesting except for the dense covering of boxthorn. Pied Shags numbering about 40 were present and use the stacks as a breeding place, as do Black Shags, which were present in smaller numbers. Petrel burrows could be seen from the boat.

Whangara Island lies about half-way between Gisborne and Tolaga Bay and is connected with the mainland at low tide. It contains nothing of ornithological interest.

Motuaroi Island. This is about a half-mile off shore in Anaura Bay and is a narrow island about three-fourths of a mile in length. Vegetation on the southern face consists of a mixed insular association, with considerable areas of bracken and flax on the summit and western end, while the northern face is made up of precipitous papa cliffs, except for a few areas where the bush extends down over the main ridge. A complete survey of the island was not practicable, but a few burrows of Grey-faced Petrel were found in a patch of bush on the northern face, and further burrows in flax on the main ridge. One chick examined was fully-fledged with some down still adhering.

Fluttering Shearwaters were heard during the night, but we could not establish that they were coming ashore, and they were not heard to leave at daybreak. Northern Blue Penguins were heard coming ashore, and several nesting burrows were observed. One shearwater, either Sooty or Flesh-footed, was heard calling. A nest of a Harrier was found in bracken fern on the main ridge, and contained three young, all at varying stages of growth, and one addled egg. Other species noted were:— Shinging Cuckoo 1; Grey Warbler 3; Blackbird numerous; White-eye 12+; Hedge Sparrow numerous; Chaffinch 3; Starling common, with numerous nests containing young. The island is alive with rats (*Rattus norvegicus*), which severely restricts its otherwise excellent potential as a petrel breeding ground. At the south-east end, a small breeding colony of Pied Shags was observed by Blackburn in October, 1958, and also a breeding colony of Red-billed Gulls on the northern face in January, 1957; but neither of these areas was visited on this occasion.

Moturipa Island lies about a mile off-shore and three miles north of Motuaroi. It is small, extremely steep and difficult to climb, the eastern side rising perpendicularly, and the western side being covered with a canopy of taupata, karo, ngaio and boxthorn. Burrows of Grey-faced Petrel were found to be numerous on and near the summit, and an occasional silent bird came in after dark. Fluttering Shearwaters came ashore in large numbers, and were extremely vocal until about 1 a.m. The last birds were observed to leave the island silently at 3.45 a.m. A conservative estimate of the number of borrows of this species would be 500. Black-backed Gulls were numerous, and nests containing eggs or young numbered c. 50. Other species noted were:— Starling numerous; White-eye small flock; Northern Oystercatcher 1; Greenfinch 5; Hedge Sparrow 2 pairs.

Motuahiauru is a small islet lying about midway between Tokomaru Bay and Waipiro Bay. The higher slopes are covered with dense boxthorn interspersed with taupata, with a few open grassy patches. We found it impossible to climb. Fluttering Shearwaters came ashore in considerable numbers during the night, and other species seen were:— Reef Heron 2 pairs, probably breeding; Blackbird 1 pair; Hedge Sparrow 2 pairs; House Sparrow several; Starling numerous and nesting; Black-backed Gull several pairs.

Paritu Island. This rock was not visited by us owing to its inaccessibility, lying as it does half-way between Gisborne and Mahia Peninsula, but Blackburn reports that in October, 1957, he found a breeding colony of c. 12 pairs of Grey-faced Petrels in the taupata canopy. This was the limit of the islet's capacity.

Our survey has covered the coastal islands except those off Mahia Peninsula. No trace of nesting grounds of Diving Petrel was discovered, nor of the Flesh-footed Shearwater, although both species are numerous at sea off the coast during the breeding season. The breeding range of the Grey-faced Petrel is, however, extended, and additional breeding areas for the Fluttering Shearwater are established. Much room is left for further investigation of the islands, in particular Motuaroi, Motuheka, and the Stacks north of Pourewa.