NOTORNIS
VOLUME NINE, NUMBER FIVE - JUNE, NINETEEN SIXTY-ONE

FIELD STUDY COURSE AT FAREWELL SPIT
22-29/1/1961

By B. D. BELL, H. R. McKENZIE & R. B. SIBSON

Ever since the visit to Farewell Spit on 16/10/46 by R. H. D. Stidolph, and his account of it (*"New Zealand Bird Notes," III,* 64-67), several members of the Ornithological Society have cherished an ambition to explore thoroughly this remote region. In 1960 B.D.B. offered to organise a course for January, 1961. The offer was accepted with enthusiasm and was strongly backed by the Wildlife Division of the Internal Affairs Dept., for whom B.D.B. is Chief Field Officer. The scheme became a joint effort, Wildlife supplying three of its field staff (all members of O.S.N.Z.), the use of a Landrover for beach work, a tent, camping gear, etc., while O.S.N.Z. supplied all other transport and facilities. Wildlife was anxious to gain information on the bird life of the Spit and was very generous in the share it took in the undertaking.

Having met at Nelson on the morning of Jan. 21, the party travelled north-west to the base of the Spit at Puponga. It consisted of Mesdames Patricia Fooks, Auck.; Margaret McGrath, Wgtn.; Hetty McKenzie, Clevedon; Miss Dorothy Grantham, Invercargill; Messrs. A. Blackburn (President), R. Blackburn, D. V. Merton (Wildlife), Gisborne; R. B. Sibson, R. H. Sibson, M. J. Hogg, Auck.; H. R. McKenzie, Clevedon; M. J. Imber, Hawera; I. G. Andrew, Palm. Nth.; F. C. Kinsky, R. R. Wiblin, Wgtn.; B. D. Bell (Wildlife), Blenheim; T. Hartley-Smith (Wildlife), Greymouth; E. K. S. Rowe, Rangiora; D. H. Brathwaite, Christchurch; nineteen in all. Mr. S. W. Freeman, who farms at the base of the Spit, had promised the use of his woolshed. The party arrived to find the woolshed thoroughly cleaned out and a new tank full of water on a trailer standing by. This was typical of the many kindnesses shown by the Freeman family. Kitchen and storeroom were set up at one end of the shed, with sleeping quarters in the compartments round the sides, leaving a large open space in the middle. Two tents were pitched in an ideal spot nearby, the occupants being greeted at once by a Yellow-breasted Tit. Throughout the course everyone, in camp and field, worked with a will and the harmonious spirit could hardly have been excelled.

Reports quoted by R. H. D. Stidolph, 1948, from Mr. James Drummond's "Nature Notes" in the "Auckland Weekly News," one by L. L. Redick, 1919, one by H. P. Washbourne at some earlier date, and the account by H. Guthrie-Smith, 1924, in his book, "Sorrows and Joys of a New Zealand Naturalist," indicate that great changes in the nature of the Spit have taken place. With such an exposed and unstable terrain this is to be expected and such changes will continue. At present there are roughly three zones, each running for most of the length of the Spit. The outer zone immediately above the firm sand of the ocean beach is composed of bare moving sandhills. The broad central zone is largely vast sandflats, some being of hundreds of acres, interspersed with both bare and growth-covered sandhills, while near

each end the more consolidated ground is thickly scrub-covered. Through gaps in the outer sandhills on either side the biggest tides reach the levels of the inner zone and it was a little surprising to find large pieces of driftwood carried into the very heart of the Spit. The inner zone, or south side, is mostly of consolidated dunes, covered with a mixed growth of lupin, pohuehue, toetoe, marramgrass, rush, cassinia, gorse, sand plants and some grasses and weeds. Some of the inner flats between these dunes and the broad inner sand flats are consolidated and have a sward of sheep-cropped maritime plants, especially *samolus* and *selliera,* dotted with rushes. From the inner high tide-mark extends southward a vast area of tideflat, first of *salicornia,* then of *zostera,* with large areas of bare sand, the main feeding ground of the waders and waterfowl. High spring tides, combined with heavy rain, had flooded large areas of the inner flats to a depth of a few inches. Most of this water disappeared in a few days. Nearer the base of the Spit there are small lakes and ponds which are virtually permanent, the largest of these, three miles up the Spit, providing quite a distinct habitat. Beyond the Lighthouse (16 miles from base) a sand area extends to what earlier naturalists have called "Shelly Banks," then far on under the sea into Cook Strait. The portion of the Spit that is above the ordinary tides is half to three-quarters of a mile wide, the greatest width being at the Lighthouse and at the base. It is grazed by cattle and sheep and a few odd deer. The grazing seems to be aiding consolidation and to be therefore beneficial, but if not wisely handled could easily cause damage.

The accounts of Stidolph of his trip in 1946 and of H. Guthrie-Smith, 1924, indicate the difficulty of birdwatching in this large area. It is still difficult to-day. The outer beach can be negotiated only with a four-wheel drive vehicle and only at low tide. The inner beach is negotiable only for about six miles, but at all times except high tide. Therefore on the census day the two young men who were dropped at the Lighthouse, at sixteen miles, had to cover the ground for two miles further on, wait until the high tide had driven the birds up, then work back three miles going back and forth across the Spit until they reached the area of the next party and walk on down to the six mile mark on the inner side to be picked up. Others had little less to accomplish. It is not armchair bird-watching. Great credit is due to the ladies and the several boys who kept pace with mature men in the long hours of hard marching for so many days. All three authors had made previous even if hurried investigations of the Spit, that of B. D. Bell being shortly before the course and more comprehensive. An essential factor was the tireless and skilful handling of the Land-rover by T. Hartley-Smith ("Goldie"), always cheerful and helpful in his sometimes exacting task.

The first two days were occupied in studying feeding grounds and flight-lines and finding out where the birds rested at high tide. Parties were taken up the outer beach up to ten miles and the inner beach to six miles. The less experienced observers were helped by the leaders to improve their techniques at counting and identifying. Large flocks had of course to be estimated. Thus where the number of a species is shown as 808, it could mean that two flocks were estimated at 400 each and a party of 8 was seen also.

The spring tides were lessening, so it was decided that the census,

the vital operation, should take place on the third day, 24/1/61. It had been found that the birds came up into the central sand flats anywhere from two miles above the base to the vicinity of the tip, so sixteen miles had to be covered. Also the decreasing tides allowed more birds every day to rest on the southern flats next to the inner side so that the long inner tideline had to be included. The census day fortunately was fairly cloudy, with a moderate breeze, so that conditions were good for counting and for travel on the sand. Teams were put off at their stations as follows:—

2 to 4 miles, D.H.B. and R.H.S.; 4 to 6, A.B. and P.F.; 6 to 8, K.R. and T.H.S.; 8 to 11, R.B.S. and D.G.; 11 to 13, M.J,H, alone; 13 to 15, M.J.I. and R.B.; 15 to 18, I.G.A. and D.V.M.; 10 to 17, inner beach, B.D.B. and R.R.W.; 6 to 10, inner beach, F.C.K. and M.McG.

The leader is mentioned first in each case The McKenzies were based at the six mile point to assist generally. The upper teams were taken up the outer beach first and the lower ones up as far as the six mile point on the inner beach later. Each team waited for "zero hour," erected a big tripod of driftwood to show where its zone began and then worked homeward until reaching the tripod mark of the next team. The very satisfactory result is shown on the chart. In a few cases the figure shown is that of a day other than the census, when a larger count was obtained. For instance, 18 Long-billed Curlews were seen together on 22nd, but only 9 on 24th, the census day. The full details of the census and the notes of the other days have been charted in detail, copies to be kept by Wildlife and O.S.N.Z. for the use of any subsequent expeditions.

RARE BIRDS

While observations were being made on the numbers and behaviour of the more familiar shorebirds, some exciting rarities were identified and carefully studied by many members of the party. The first Mongolian Dotterel *(Charadrius mongolus)* to be recorded in New Zealand was found and reported by M. J. Hogg, a schoolboy of 16 years, who, on two subsequent days took groups to the sheltered flat at the 13 miles to the spot constantly favoured by this bird. A surprising episode was the sighting of a White-capped Noddy *(Anous minutus)* on the outer beach sitting among White-fronted Terns. The speeding truck was brought to a sudden halt and the occupants tumbled out in time to see the bird fly slowly past them out to sea. It was later found that Mr. Claude Wilkins of Collingwood Motors had seen it earlier in the day on the beach with a party of Oystercatchers. He has been driving a truck up the outer beach to the Lighthouse once a week and more frequently in the tourist season, for fifteen years, but had not seen such a bird before. The O.S.N.Z. party was therefore lucky indeed. Other rare birds were a Little Whimbrel *(Numenius minutus)* identified by B. D. Bell; a Pomarine Skua *(Stercorarius pomarinus)*, studied by R. B. Sibson and others; a Grey Plover *(Plurialis squatarola)*, first found and identified by M. J. Imber and seen subsequently by various observers under most favourable conditions; a Black-tailed Godwit, race not determined, seen by F. C. Kinsky; and a Black Stilt *(Himantopus novaezealandiae)*, which frequented a lagoon towards the base of the Spit. Two Curlew Sandpipers, located only on 22nd January, seem to be the first recorded in the South Island since the collecting days of Edgar Stead.

SEA BIRDS

As soon as it was realised that great numbers of sea-birds, especially petrels, could often be seen off the north coast, a watch was kept as far as possible. Fluttering Shearwaters were sometimes present in thousands. Among other species which came sufficiently close to be accurately identified were Wandering Albatross, Sooty Shearwaters, Buller's Shearwaters (4), Fairy Prion (50+), Diving Petrel. Large dark Petrels which could not be certainly identified were probably Flesh-footed, Grey-faced or even Westland Black. Gannets regularly fished these waters, but numbers are hard to estimate from, e.g. 12 sightings in one day. One Little Blue Penguin was on the beach alive. A few Fluttering Shearwaters and Fairy Prions were found dead; also one Broad-billed Prion and one Diving Petrel.

WATERFOWL AND MARSH BIRDS

BLACK SHAG — The common big shag of the Spit. No Spotted or Pied Shags were observed.

WHITE-THROATED SHAG — Not common along the Spit but plentiful from Puponga to Collingwood. Up to 90 coming in at dusk to roost in tall kanuka beside pond on Freeman's farm. Among them were a few of the light-bellied phase.

WHITE-FACED HERON — Forages widely over the zostera flats, gathering into flocks on the inner side at high tide.

AUSTRALIAN BITTERN — Three on permanent lagoon at 3 miles. An odd pair or two could well breed.

BLACK SWAN — Scattered all over the vast inner tideflats, these could not be counted. They could only be dealt with from the air. No new or old nests were found.

GREY DUCK AND MALLARD — Those seen up the Spit were Grey but the larger numbers near the base consisted of Grey, hybrids, and a rather small proportion of true Mallard.

AUSTRALIAN HARRIER — Always a few along the Spit. Odd pairs certainly breed.

WESTERN WEKA — One of the characteristic birds of the Spit. Numbers difficult to estimate; probably hundreds. A deserted cow-trampled nest had held four eggs.

PUKEKO — A family party of five was seen near the 3 mile pond at dusk as they emerged from the sandhills to feed on the zostera flats. Odd pairs occur elsewhere in the wetter swamps.

SKUAS, GULLS, TERNS

POMARINE SKUA — One, evidently an immature bird of the pale phase, was identified by its larger size, conspicuous wing patches and pale rump. (v. Serventy & Whittell. Birds of Western Australia. 140).

ARCTIC SKUA — Not uncommon in Cook Strait. Odd birds were to be seen among the Shearwaters off the northern beach. Others rather surprisingly came in over the zostera flats, and sometimes settled. (cf. Fleming *Notornis VIII* 236).

BLACK-BACKED GULL — Scattered throughout, making an estimated population of c.200. A few pairs were still at nests in the sand-hills with big downy chicks at the running stage. At Shelly Banks c.25 adults and several well-grown young were the last of what appears to be the biggest breeding colony.

RED-BILLED GULL — Scattered throughout but no sign of breeding, though so reported by Redick in 1919 and found with nests and eggs at Shelly Banks by Stidolph on 16/10/46.

BLACK-BILLED GULL — Scattered in small parties, lingering especially about the shallow lagoons; but no evidence of breeding. In 1924 Guthrie-Smith found some thousands nesting on Bird Island near Collingwood and his photograph (Sorrows and Joys of a N.Z. Naturalist, p. 48) shows Black-billed Gulls among the White-fronted Terns.

BLACK-FRONTED TERN — A few were seen every day. They seemed to drift in from the south and to be passing along the Spit, though none was seen to fly out to sea. The nearest known breeding grounds are on the upper reaches of the Wairau above the Wash Bridge, some 80 miles to the south. Many of the Black-fronted Terns which winter on the west coast of Wellington could well reach their destination via Farewell Spit, which lies conveniently on one route. It would be interesting to know how many, if any, winter on the Spit.

CASPIAN TERN — Redick in 1919, Guthrie-Smith in 1924, Stidolph in 1946, found them nesting at Shelly Banks. When I.G.A. and D.V.M. visited this area only 22 birds and one late chick were present, and nesting was over. Otherwise Caspian Terns were thinly spread along both sides of the Spit, gathering into small groups to rest.

WHITE-FRONTED TERN — At intervals all the way up the outer beach there were usually small flocks of resting birds, but numbers varied from day to day, the biggest tally being 1085. Many were often fishing out to sea. It is difficult to know how much significance should be attached to these figures, viz. Jan. 22, 0-10 miles, 18, including one banded bird; Jan. 23, 0-10 miles, 14; Jan. 24, 0-18 miles, 602; Jan. 27, 0-13 miles, 1085. As there are substantial colonies in Westland, it is possible that some of these birds were moving north or preparing to cross the Tasman to Australia. The percentage of birds of this season was very small. I.G.A. and D.V.M. reported no White-fronted Terns at Shelly Banks where Redick in 1919 reported breeding, and Stidolph found 800 starting to nest in 1946, though Guthrie-Smith found none in 1924. However, these Terns are notoriously capricious and irregular in their breeding. Bird Island near Collingwood where Guthrie-Smith estimated a colony of 12,000 - 15,000 pairs has been eroded away.

WHITE-CAPPED NODDY — After a visit to the '13 mile' to study the Mongolian Dotterel on 27/1/61, a party was returning along the open beach by Landrover, when H.R.McK. noticed this smallish black tern sitting among White-fronted Terns and called "Goldie" to an abrupt halt. As everyone piled out the tern flew strongly up-wind past the rear of the truck and out to sea. The silvery whiteness of its forehead and forecrown contrasting with the general

COUNTS OF WADERS, GULLS & TERNS — FAREWELL SPIT, 22 - 28 January, 1961

Dates — January	22	23	24 — CENSUS											26	27	28	Biggest Daily Tally
Initials of Census Teams			R.H.S. D.H.B	A.B. P.F.	K.R. T.H.S.	R.B.S. D.G.	M.J.H.	M.J.I. R.B.	I.G.A. D.V.M.	F.C.K. M.McG Inner	B.D.B. R.R.W Inner	Truck Party Outer	Totals				
Miles (Sections of Spit)	5-10	0-10	2-4	4-6	6-8	8-11	11-13	13-15	15-18	6-10	10-17	0-16					
S.I. Pied Oystercatcher	940	250+	160	157	235	70	300	75	1000	13	38		2048				2048
Northern Oystercatcher	1	1										1	1				1
Black Oystercatcher	20		23										23	42	27		42
Gray Plover	1									1			1	1			1
Pacific Golden Plover	10			9	10	3	1				7		30	30			30
Banded Dotterel	470	×100	15	285	140	140	240	200		28	40		1088	×100	×100		1088
Mongolian Dotterel							1						1	1	1		1
New Zealand Dotterel	5			4									4				5
Wrybill	10			10	6	4	8	1					29		1		29
Long-billed Curlew	18	4			8			1					9		4		18
Little Whimbrel											1		1				1
Asiatic Whimbrel	19	21				21							21	20+			21
Bar-tailed Godwit	9300		3000	780	3000	900	225	110	1400	4470	3835		17720				17720
Black-tailed Godwit (sp?)		1											—				1
Turnstone	405		12	200	36	160	80	80	25	21	132	62	808				808
Knot	15500		4500	1500	2500	1050	280	80	900	12300	4260		27370				27370
Sharp-tailed Sandpiper	2												—		2	2	2
Curlew Sandpiper	2												—				2
Red-necked Stint	8			9									9		3		9
Pied Stilt			13	5									18		12	11	18
Black Stilt													—		1	1	1
Pomarine Skua													—	1			1
Arctic Skua		4					1		3	1			5				5
Black-backed Gull			Thinly Scattered Throughout										c200				200
Red-billed Gull	65			1	12	45	60	35	20	23	3		199				199
Black-billed Gull	51			3	12	40	30	2	7		7		101				101
Black-fronted Tern	4	2					1		3		1		5	5			5
Caspian Tern	85				9		8	1	22	34	7	5	86				86
White-fronted Tern	18	14	5				15	17	60			505	602	×100	1085		1085
White-capped Noddy													—		1		1

sootiness of its plumage make this a very striking bird. This tropical species which breeds as near to New Zealand as the Kermadecs and Norfolk Island has not previously been recorded from the South Island and indeed has only once been reported from the North Island (v. *Notornis VI,* 176), when on 10/10/53 a single gale-driven vagrant sought refuge in a tree at South Kaipara Heads.

WADERS

SOUTH ISLAND PIED OYSTERCATCHER — This was by far the most numerous of the indigenous waders, the number being over 2,000. There were further parties of c.1,200 at Pakawau and many in Westhaven Inlet which did not come to the Spit, though it is locally reported that they do so when tides are extremely high. These oystercatchers do not breed on the Spit. Guthrie-Smith said that at the time of his visit they had already nested. The number of unemployed birds which are always present may have led him to believe that they nested there, or he may have meant that they had nested elsewhere. In the height of the breeding season on 5/11/58 H.R.McK. counted 111 scattered along the ocean beach up to the Lighthouse, definitely not breeding. Recent research has shown that this bird does not breed until it is two or three years old and large flocks of immature non-breeders occur during the breeding season in suitable localities throughout New Zealand.

BLACK OYSTERCATCHER — A few pairs breed on the Spit, mostly at the western end. Among those breeding, which now had well-grown young, was one smudgy bird of the variety known as "*reischeki.*" A similar bird was seen there by H.R.McK. on 5/11/58. Most of the 42 seen were at the base of the Spit and were probably from the rocky outside coast, where they frequently congregate on the reefs below Fossil Point.

GREY PLOVER — Between Jan. 22 and 26 this bird appeared to resort daily at full tide to the same stretch of shore on the edge of the zostera flats. As it was not unduly shy or wary, excellent views were obtained by several members of the team. On one occasion when a Pacific Golden Plover was standing conveniently near, it was seen that the Grey Plover was not only a greyer bird but was also distinctly bigger and robuster looking. When it was forced to fly, the diagnostic black axillaries and white rump were easily and clearly visible.

This is only the third definite record of this cosmopolitan arctic breeding species in N.Z., the second having been made only a few days earlier at Grassmere (v. p. 172). According to Sharland the Grey Plover is a very rare visitor to Tasmania.

PACIFIC GOLDEN PLOVER — Found only in scattered small groups. The Spit does not seem to provide the type of habitat which these plovers like when they are in the bigger flocks which occur elsewhere in N.Z.

BANDED DOTTEREL — As these were scattered throughout in loose flocks, numbers were difficult to assess. No dense concentrations were found. It is likely that many were on passage. It would be interesting to know how many winter there. One pair on territory appeared to have hidden young. Some hundreds sometimes fed in the green paddocks of Freeman's farm.

NEW ZEALAND DOTTEREL — Farewell Spit appears to be a suitable breeding place. The occurrence of this rare dotterel here is of considerable interest, because none are known to breed between the province of Auckland and the region of Foveaux Strait. All seen were in pale plumage.

MONGOLIAN DOTTEREL — A single specimen of this new addition to the New Zealand list is described elsewhere. As this dotterel is well known in south-eastern Australia, its occurrence in N.Z. is not altogether surprising.

WRYBILL — A few Wrybills in juvenile or worn breeding dress were scattered about the shallow lagoons. Their presence in late January tends to confirm an earlier suspicion (*Notornis VIII,* 164 and 261), that Farewell Spit is a regular stopping place, at least for some Wrybills, on their annual migration to the North Island.

LONG-BILLED CURLEW — The flock of 18 was the biggest so far recorded in New Zealand. Such numbers on Farewell Spit may not be exceptional as 13 were seen there in 1958 on the outer beach by H.M.McK. and H.R.McK. and the bird is common in Tasmania.

LITTLE WHIMBREL — There are few records in N.Z. of this arctic wader which according to some authors is the Siberian race of the near-extinct Eskimo Curlew *(N. borealis)* of North America. Though regular migrants to Queensland in some numbers, Little Whimbrels are seldom reported in south-eastern Australia and the bird is so rare in N.Z. that the definite sighting of one as it rested alone on mud near *salicornia* is an event of some note. Amongst Pacific Golden Plover, a Little Whimbrel could easily be overlooked.

ASIATIC WHIMBREL — This flock of 21, by far the biggest so far recorded in New Zealand was seen on several days in the same locality as the tide came in. Whimbrels could be expected annually on the Spit. These were closely examined in case there was a dark-rumped American Whimbrel with them.

EASTERN BAR-TAILED GODWIT — It is considered that the count of 17,720 was well made, even though large flocks had to be estimated. There were about 200 more at Pakawau and some at Westhaven Inlet. The total, though large, is rather smaller than some members of the party had been led to expect.

BLACK-TAILED GODWIT — One seen by F.C.K. in flight but the sub-species could not be determined. So far all South Island records of Black-tailed Godwits have been of the dusky American bird *(haemastica)* but small parties of the Asiatic race *(melanuroides)* have been occurring near Auckland in recent years.

TURNSTONE — These seem to be visiting New Zealand in increasing numbers. Sizable flocks of Turnstones were to be seen fairly evenly distributed up the Spit, not only on most lagoons, even at low tide, but also on the open shore, especially where fresh seaweed had been cast by recent tides, and about low tide pools. A thin trickle of Turnstones flying into the sandhills was an early sign that the tide was beginning to cover the zostera flats. As they moved about a good deal and did not gather into compact flocks an accurate estimate of numbers was very difficult.

KNOT — The surprising number of 27,370 was carefully checked and is deemed, if anything, to be an under-estimate. This species has a habit of massing to form a grey carpet of birds. As a result counts are usually short of the actual number. Stidolph, near the tip of the Spit, saw Knots and Godwits in approximately equal numbers. He had no opportunity of examining the roosts further down, where there could easily have been a preponderance of Knots. It is somewhat of a coincidence that at the spot where Stidolph saw 750 each of Godwits and Knots, I.G.A. and D.V.M. saw 900 of each, though there were 500 further Godwits on Shelly Banks nearby. The Spit is a "Knot place." In some harbours there are some thousands of Godwits and no Knots. In others the flocks are mixed but there are none where there are Knots and no Godwits; which seems to indicate that Knots are more restricted by some as yet unknown ecological factors.

SIBERIAN PECTORAL SANDPIPER — Two seen on several days either at 6-mile lagoon or at 3-mile pond.

CURLEW SANDPIPER — Two were seen once only on 22/1/61 (R.B.S., F.G.K.) at 6-mile lagoon.

RED-NECKED STINT — Usually some, with a maximum of 9, several times at 6-mile lagoon.

PIED STILT — Farewell Spit is evidently not a suitable feeding ground for Stilts. A few, including two parents with three flying young, were usually present on 3-mile pond.

BLACK STILT — One constantly seen on 3-mile pond. It appeared robuster in body and shorter in leg than the Pied Stilts. It may have been resting on passage from one of the few known breeding-grounds far to the south.

PASSERINES

Passerines were noted only incidentally. The few native passerines seen actually on the Spit were Pipit, Gray Warbler and Silvereye; but introduced species were much more in evidence. Starlings were in flocks of some size and were estimated at 2000+. Skylarks and Hedge-sparrows had not ceased singing and occurred widely in all suitable habitats. A few pairs of Yellowhammers obviously breed. Also listed were: Blackbird, Songthrush, Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Lesser Redpoll, Chaffinch and House Sparrow. On a future visit two teams could well be allocated on the census day to concentrate more fully on these birds, one for the more stable scrub-and-pond country of the first four miles, and one for the region around the lighthouse where human occupation and a variety of well grown introduced trees form a distinct habitat. If a bird-observatory on the lines of those which have been established around the coast of Britain, were to be contemplated for New Zealand, a very suitable site could be found in the vicinity of the Farewell Spit lighthouse.

★

After three strenuous days on the Spit the team was given a change and a treat in the form of a trip into the mountains behind the Cobb hydro-electric power station as far as the Cobb Lake. This was no rest for the drivers, Goldie in the Landrover and Ken Rowe in his station-wagon; nor perhaps was it all unmitigated delight for

those on the outer side of the narrow winding road as it snaked round the cliffs high above the river. In the bush, birds were plentiful, and among those seen were:— Rifleman, Pigeon, Tui, Bellbird, Tomtit, Yellow-crowned Parakeet, Lesser Redpoll and Weka. At the summit (3450ft.) the botanists were allowed time to indulge their hobby and worry over a difficult hebe, while the young geologists collected specimens of serpentine. At the Cobb Lake we were welcomed by Mr. Kelly of the Forest Service and his wife. We ate our lunch in their garden overlooking the long lake. Their hospitality was even more appreciated when, as we were about to leave, we were presented with a noble haunch of venison, which later under Mrs. McKenzie's culinary skill was to become, together with a gigantic purple onion from the Sopers' garden, a regal dish, the recollection of which still makes the participants smack their lips.

On the way home while we paused at the salt-marshes of the Aorere near Collingwood, three Fernbirds were watched at a distance of a few yards. Fernbirds were found again on January 27th in the pakihi country where the road ends near Bainham, a locality already known to B.D.B. and D.V.M., but an excess of sandflies was not conducive to patient observation. Part of another day was spent at Westhaven, where unfortunately the tide was out, at the Kaihoka lakes and the mouth of the Paturau River. It was an interesting trip into a rather remote corner, but ornithological results were disappointing.

It is hoped that the Farewell Spit project will be repeated in four years' time and that the experience gained on this first occasion will be helpful to future expeditions. The number of active participants should be not fewer than twenty-two; at least half of them to be of considerable experience. The time for such a course can be cut down very little, as allowance must be made for wet or windy days. Flying sand can make travel difficult and counting impossible. Little can be achieved without one or more four-wheel drive vehicles; but only long days of hard walking will produce the best results in what should always be an exciting area for the student of shore-birds.

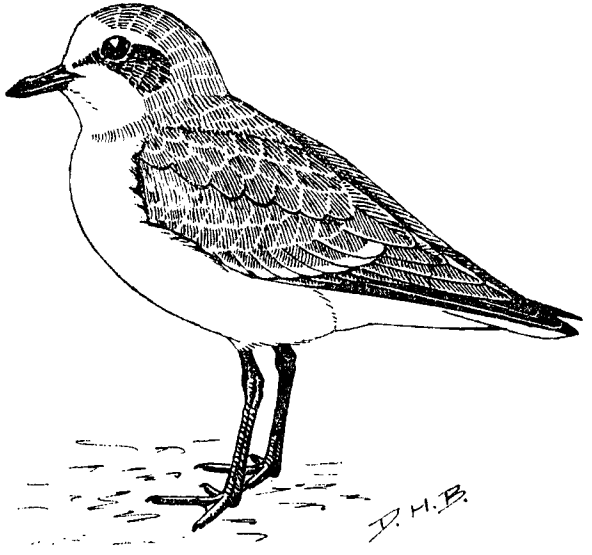
REPORTS ON TWO RARE WADERS

(a) MONGOLIAN DOTTEREL — In the early afternoon of 24/1/61, the day of the wader-census, I was crossing a green flat among the dunes about thirteen miles from the base of the Spit, when a small gray and white dotterel alighted only about ten yards away. The flat, which only the biggest tides could reach, was carpeted with *selliera* close cropped by wandering stock and dotted with clumps of yellow lupin, cassinia and coarse rush. Sprinkled over it feeding were 20-30 Banded Dotterels *(C. bicinctus)* in the various phases of plumage which are normally to be seen in January.

The dotterel which puzzled me was about the size of a male Banded Dotterel but its back and upperparts were of a uniform gray very faintly tinged with rufous. The underparts were pure white, except where a narrow strip of gray extended partially across the breast; above the gray throat was whitish; the forehead and a streak above the eye were pale; below the eye was a dark patch; the tail was ribbed with white on either side; the bill was black with a rather bulbous tip and longer and thicker than that of a Banded Dotterel; the legs were slate gray. It was seldom still, dashing here and there to feed

on small insects, stopping two or three times to pick at a dried cowpat. When it faced me I was immediately struck by its similarity to a small New Zealand Dotterel *(C. obscurus)*. Fortunately I had recently become familiar with the Large Sand Dotterel *(C. leschenaulti)* in the Firth of Thames; and I felt pretty certain that the dotterel before me did not belong to that species. When it flew it was joined in the air by two Banded Dotterels. I thought it looked slightly longer in the wing and showed an indistinct pale wingbar. As it disappeared over the sand-hills it clearly called ' trik.'

I had no companion on my 'beat' of the census. When at the end of the day I mentioned the suspected Mongolian Dotterel *(C. mongolus)* to other members of the course, it was decided to revisit the area, if possible, in the hope that the bird would still be there. Two days later conditions were good, except that the wind was blustery; and when six members converged quietly and hopefully on the *selliera* flat, the dotterel was soon located but not before we were almost on top of it, and its identity was confirmed after very close study. When Banded and Mongolian Dotterels are in winter plumage they are so alike that the two species have frequently been confused



Mongolian Dotterel based on sketches made in the field, 26/1/61 — winter plumage

in Australia; where the two occur together on the coast of New South Wales. Fortunately, two of the viewers, D. H. Brathwaite and R. B. Sibson had both watched Mongolian Dotterels in Australia. It was generally agreed that this was a grayer bird than usual Banded Dotterel in eclipse and conspicuously white-faced; but the points of difference in the field are so slender that a Mongolian Dotterel among Banded could very easily be overlooked. This bird tended to be solitary and returned to the identical corner of the flat when the Banded Dotterels

flew away. Its call as it rose in flight was written down as 'tik-it,' less incisive than the typical note of a Banded Dotterel and lacking its carrying quality. A single soft 'tik' was also heard. On 27/1/61 when the haunt of this Mongolian Dotterel was visited for the third time, the bird was still present, so that the names of A. Blackburn and H. R. McKenzie could be added to the list of those who had satisfactory views of this Asiatic straggler, the first of its kind to be recorded in New Zealand. I am indebted to D. H. Brathwaite and R. B. Sibson who put at my disposal the notes which they made on the spot.

M. J. HOGG

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(b) LITTLE WHIMBREL — Among the many rare species recorded at Farewell Spit was a Little Whimbrel *(Numenius minutus)*. This was seen by us on the day of the census, January 24th, on the inside of the Spit at about the 11 mile mark. The following summarises the notes taken at the time.

The bird was standing on a patch of sand amongst *Salicornia*. At first glance it was thought to be a Golden Plover. Then the appearance of the bird did not seem quite right as the neck and head were much finer and the neck longer. The bill also was longer and finer with a downwards curve at the end, colour black. The back coloration was a deep rich mottled black and golden similar to that of a Golden Plover but the mottling was heavier. The undersurface was a deep buff with very slight mottling if any. The colour of the legs could not be determined as they were hidden by the *Salicornia* but did not appear to be exceptionally long.

The bird was put to flight to see if there was any distinctive flight pattern but nothing stood out. Fortunately the bird called as it flew off. Our rendering of this was a sharp "weep . . . weep" in slow succession followed by a pause and then a repetition. The bird flew off down the inside of the Spit towards the lighthouse. A measurement was taken of the imprint of the mid-toe left in the sand and this was 34 mm.

R. WIBLIN & B. D. BELL

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WINTER OCCURRENCE OF JUVENILE GANNETS IN NEW ZEALAND WATERS

By P. A. S. STEIN

In their "Migration and Dispersal of New Zealand Gannets" (*Emu*, September, 1958) Wodzicki and Stein set out evidence to show that gannet chicks reared in New Zealand depart from their home rookery at the age of about 15½ weeks, leave the neighbourhood, and eventually make their way across the Tasman Sea to Australia. Although a number feed along the northern coasts for a few weeks, by late May or early June only an occasional straggler remains.

These young birds grow up in Australia. Their stay there varies from two to four seasons. During this time they change their brownish-