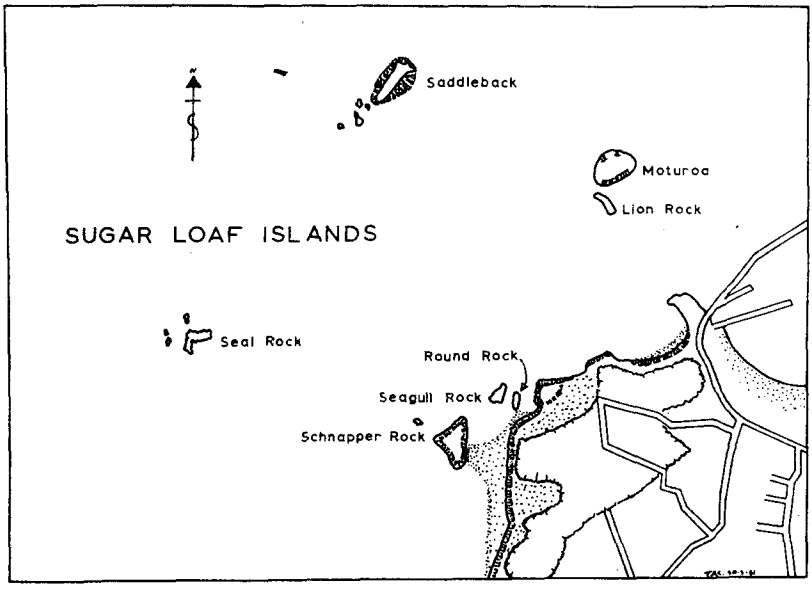
NOTES ON SOME OFFSHORE ISLANDS

By D. V. MERTON

(a) SUGAR LOAF ISLANDS: NEW PLYMOUTH

During September, 1960, I visited the seven islets off Port New Plymouth, in the course of my official duties. The map was prepared by Thomas Caithness, whose help is gratefully acknowledged.



Mataora Island or Round Rock:

This island is separated from Paritutu Beach by a shallow channel which is dry at low tides. It is a little over an acre in area, rises 99ft. above sea level, and as its name suggests, is more or less hemispherical in shape. It is of volcanic origin, and is capped with light sandy soil. Coastal flax is the dominant plant species and forms a dense cover over much of this rock.

Landings were made on both the 9th and 12th, when upwards of twenty Red-billed Gulls *(L. scopulinus)* were showing interest in the rocky ledges of the north-west cliffs. A Blue Penguin corpse was also found.

Pararaki Island or Seagull Rock:

Pararaki Island is 73ft. high and is two acres in area. It lies to seaward of Mataora Island, from which it is separated by a channel one chain wide. When a landing was made on the 9th, the original taupata covering was found to have been destroyed by an invasion of rabbits, but as these were no longer on the island, a variety of young plants, including taupata and boxthorn, were regenerating.

Upwards of 500 Red-billed Gulls were preparing to nest on a ridge, and adjacent area of rock, at the north-eastern corner. Nesting material was being carried by some birds, while others brooded nest foundations. Starlings *(S. vulgaris)*, too, were nesting on this island.

Motuotamatea Island or Schnapper Rock:

A visit to this island was made on the 19th. Schnapper Rock is three acres in area, rises 98ft. above sea level and at low tides is separated from the Paritutu Beach by a waist-deep stretch of water. The island is gently rounded and has large areas of mesembryanthemum and introduced grasses, but taupata is the dominant shrub, and forms a dense low canopy over the remainder of the rock.

On a rock face at the western end of the island 200+ White-fronted Terns *(S. striata)* were preparing to nest. A group of 20 Red-billed Gulls was resting nearby, as were scattered Black-backed Gulls *(L. dominicanus)*. Five Black Shags were perched on a rock off the eastern end of the island. A few Starlings were seen to roost in the taupata at nights.

Seal Rocks:

These proved to be a low, wave-swept group of six rocks, the largest being only 30ft. above sea level. Of the group, this rock alone was high enough to be dry at all times, and was visited on the 17th. The only vegetation found here was a solitary, weather-worn taupata bush.

The remains of many old gull nests were seen, and from the behaviour of about 200 Red-billed Gulls and 60 White-fronted Terns, they intended to nest on this rock again. Six Black Shags were roosting on one of the smaller rocks along with 100+ Red-billed Gulls, 20+ White-fronted Terns, and 9 Black-backed Gulls. An occupied Starling nest was found near the highest point.

Lion Rocks:

Also on the 17th the three small rocks off Moturoa Island were visited. Of these, only one was high enough (40ft. a.s.l.), to support vegetation. Taupata, as before, was the dominant species, and formed a dense low cap, over the summit.

This larger rock was about to become a nesting place for upwards of 200 Red-billed Gulls, and 50+ White-fronted Terns. The gulls were building on top of the low taupata, while the terns occupied a lower, sloping rock face. A few immature Black-backed Gulls and 17 Black Shags were roosting on this rock.

Although no seals were encountered on nearby Moturoa Island, 30 were seen on these three rocks.

Motumahunga or Saddleback Island:

The night of the 17th was spent ashore on this island. Saddleback Island is three acres in area, and was well named, for it has two summits, which are connected by a high saddle. All sides are steep, but a spur at the south end gives relatively easy access to the 175ft. summit. Vegetation was dominantly taupata, which began near sea level as a low scrub, but grew taller nearer the summit, so as to form a canopy up to 10ft. high.

Soon after dark, at 7.5 p.m., Diving Petrels *(P. urinatrix)* began coming ashore, and the breeding population of these birds must be several thousands. All suitable soil on the upper part of the island was honey-combed with burrows, containing single eggs and brooding birds. Nesting amongst the Diving Petrels in the vicinity of the south summit were perhaps 100 White-faced Storm Petrels *(P. marina)*. These were in the early stages of burrowing. This island is well known as a Starling roost, and many thousands of these birds were present during the night. Other species seen included one Blackbird *(T. merula)*, one Shining Cuckoo *(C. lucidus)*, five Reef Herons *(E. sacra)*, Blue Penguins (breeding), 300+ Red-billed Gulls, which were evidently going to nest on the northern cliffs, plus a few odd Black-backed Gulls. A newly completed but empty nest of the latter was found on the northern summit.

200+ seals occupied the lower sea cliffs.

Moturoa Island:

The night of the 18th was spent ashore on this island, which was found to be a steep volcanic cone with many bluffs. Moturoa has an area of four acres and rises 268ft. a.s.l.

Taupata formed a low dense canopy over much of the island, but in a few places it was high enough to walk under. A variety of other native plants was also represented.

Diving Petrels were using this island as a nesting ground, too, and all available soil was being utilised by many hundreds of these birds. The first arrival landed at 6.50 p.m. and as on Saddleback Island, all burrows examined contained an egg, and an incubating bird.

Several thousand Starlings roosted on the island over night. Twelve large Black Shags were seen perching in tall taupata, high on the western face, where an old shag nest was found. A colony of 1000+ Red-billed Gulls were preparing to nest on the western sea cliffs, while 60+ White-fronted Terns showed concern when a nearby rock face was approached. Red-billed Gulls evidently nest near the summit, too, as do scattered Black-backed Gulls. 200+ of the latter were preparing to nest on the southern cliffs. Other species recorded, were Reef Heron 3, Harrier Hawk 1, Blackbird and Dunnock.

(b) BARE ISLAND, HAWKES BAY

On 11 and 12/11/60 I visited Motukura, or Bare Island, off Waimarama Beach, Southern Hawke's Bay. Bare Island lies more or less parallel to the coast, one mile off-shore, and is approximately half a mile long by a-quarter of a mile wide. It is composed of soft crumbly papa with occasional out-crops of sand-stone, which contain a wealth of fossilised shells. The entire western side is sheer and eroding, from the 304ft. summit to sea level. The more gently sloping eastern face is densely overgrown with coastal flax and, to a lesser extent, other hardy native plants.

Under a small patch of low spreading taupata on the south ridge were about a hundred occupied burrows of the Sooty Shearwater *(P. griseus)*. These proved to be the only petrels nesting on the island, possibly because soil soft enough for burrowing was at a premium. Egg laying had not yet begun.

Sign of *Rattus norvegicus* was found and on the night of 11th November three specimens were trapped. The island was over-run by these pests, which evidently swam ashore when a launch was wrecked on the western coast about 25 years ago.

Blue Penguins *(E. minor)* were nesting in large numbers in all parts of the island, and several hundred were ashore on the night of my visit. Nests contained eggs or young of varying ages.

Nine shag nests were found in low taupata on the south ridge. One contained two newly hatched chicks and a chipped egg, while the remaining nests were unoccupied, but thirteen adult Black Shags *(P. carbo)* were nearby.

About 500 Black-backed Gull nests were scattered over the lower slopes of the island, a few containing newly hatched chicks, while others had between one and three eggs in them. Two Harriers *(C. approximans)* were seen, and a nest with three eggs found in high flax.

Starlings were found nesting on holes on the sheer western cliffs, while a small number roosted at night in the tall taupata and flax near the summit. Blackbirds were heard and an old nest found. One Dunnock *(P. modularis)* was also heard singing.

It was rather disappointing to find so few petrels nesting on the only island between Portland Island, off Mahia Peninsula, and Cook Strait, but nevertheless Bare Island is obviously well used by other sea-birds for nesting, and is of particular value as a penguin breeding ground.

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SHORT NOTES

RED-NECKED STINT IN BREEDING PLUMAGE AT THE RANGITIKEI ESTUARY DURING THE SUMMER OF 1959-60

Red-necked Stints *(Calidris ruficollis)* were first recorded at the Rangitikei Estuary during the summer of 1958-9 by I. G. Andrew (*Notornis* VIII, 193), but during the succeeding summer they were recorded in greater numbers. On 6/12/59 four, or a possible seven, were counted there and on 1/1/60 seven were located.

On this occasion, much to my surprise, one of the Stints was distinctly reddish on the neck. On each side of the foreneck there was an area of deep rufous with a narrow area down the middle of the foreneck, the throat and sides of the upper foreneck and cheeks pale rufous. The chin and base of the forehead were whitish; the crown and hind neck grey-brown streaked darker. I visited the estuary again on 3/1/60 with I. G. Andrew and we confirmed my previous observations.

From information subsequently received from Mr. H. R. McKenzie this type of plumage pattern was evidently that of a bird moulting from breeding to non-breeding plumage.

The estuary was next visited on 9/1/60, by which time the number of stints had increased to eleven. The aberrant bird had changed little apart from an apparent paling of the deep rufous areas. It was also noticed on this occasion that the upper back was mottled pale rufous and grey-brown.