

BIRDS OF CENTRE ISLAND

By W.J. COOPER

Centre Island lies in Foveaux Strait 7 km south of the South Island, 40 km west-southwest of Invercargill and 16 km southwest of Riverton, at 46°27' 30" S, 167°50' 30" E (Figure 1). The island is about 89 ha and rises to 74.5 m a.s.l.

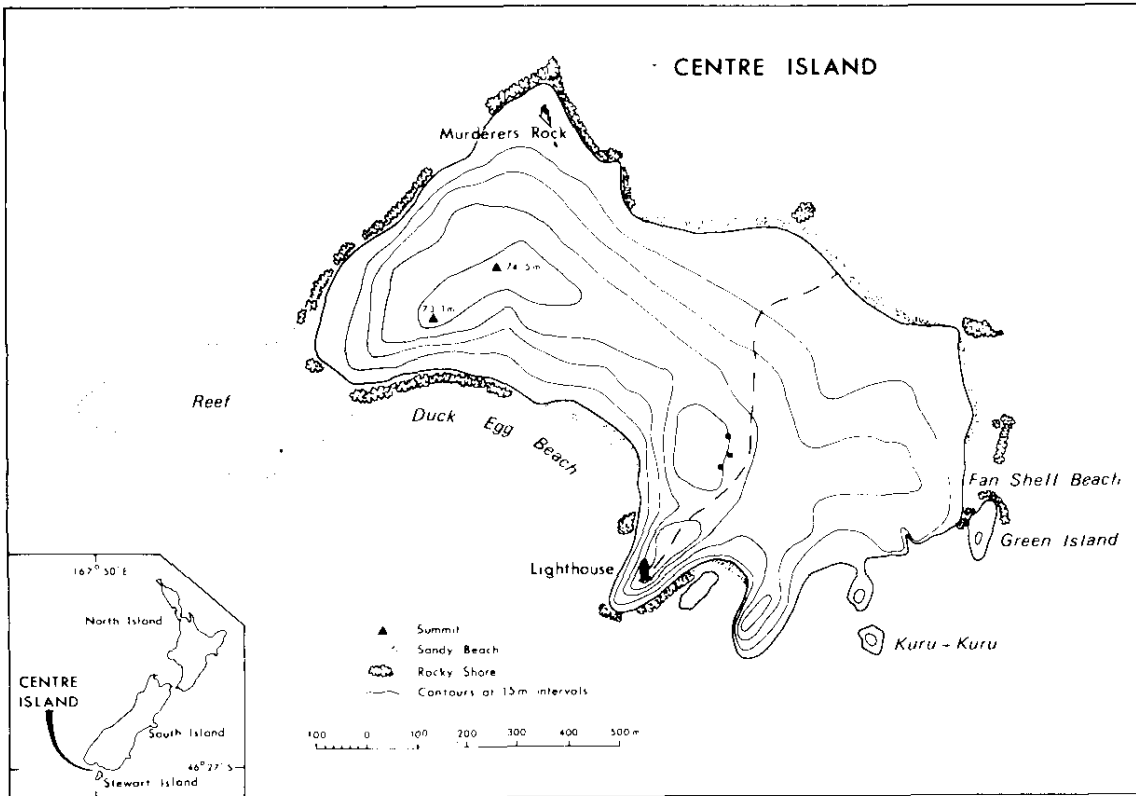


FIGURE 1 — Centre Island

Most of the island is covered with exotic pasture grasses, club rush (*Scirpus nodosus*), water-fern (*Histioglossis incisa*), *Carex appressa*, and bush lawyer (*Rubus cissoides*) in varying quantities with clumps of gorse (*Ulex europaeus*), especially on the northern slopes, and at the eastern end, flax (*Phormium colensoi*). Some scattered, stunted, wind-shorn macrocarpa trees (*Cupressus macrocarpa*) are near the houses.

The steeper slopes to the south and west have an interesting mat of saltmarsh vegetation with *Selleria radicans*, *Samolus repens*, the shore gentian (*Gentiana saxosa*), *Scirpus cernuus*, native celery (*Apium prostratum*), and *Crassula moschata* as predominant species.

The cliffs, drier soils and rock outcrops feature the blue shore tussock (*Poa astonii*), *Hebe elliptica*, and scattered muttonbird scrub (*Senecio reinoldii*) as dominant species.

Some taupata (*Coprosma repens*) is on coastal banks.

The dunes backing the beaches to the north and east are dominated by marram (*Ammophila arenaria*). Pingao (*Desmoschoenus spiralis*) dominates a small part of the dunes on the northern shore.

The island was reserved as "a site for a lighthouse and Premises connected therewith" in 1875 and was occupied by lighthouse keepers from 1878 until 1989, when the lighthouse was automated.

Known scientific visits have been few and brief. Maida and Olga Sansom visited Kuru-kuru, a rocky pinnacle below the lighthouse, on 21 November 1955 (Sansom M.L. 1956: Two nesting colonies of Stewart Island Shags. *Notornis* 7:16-20). A. Wright visited the island for four days in August 1975 and for three days in December 1975 (Wright 1975: Survey - Centre Island (Rarotoke), 6-9 August and 10-12 December 1975. Unpubl. reports, NZ Wildlife Service). A party of OSNZ members led by Hugh Robertson visited the island on 13 January 1987 (OSNZ Southland records).

I visited the island on 26-27 October 1989 with Sue Larson and Mel McKinlay of the Department of Conservation, Invercargill. During our stay we traversed the shoreline, cliff tops, slopes, and main ridge of the island at least twice.

BULLER'S MOLLYMAWK *Diomedea bulleri*

Both Wright and the OSNZ party recorded Buller's Mollymawk offshore. I saw none during my visit.

NORTHERN GIANT PETREL *Macronectes halli*

Although recorded by Wright and the OSNZ party, I saw none during my visit.

ANTARCTIC FULMAR *Fulmarus glacialisoides*

Wright found skeletal remains in the sandhills on the northern shore. This is the only record.

CAPE PIGEON *Daption capense*

At least two seen offshore by the OSNZ party is the only record.

PRION *Pachyptila* sp.

I found a prion chick c.14 days old with pale grey down in a burrow 1 m long under a rock. Although I could not clearly see its bill, given the time of the year, I suspect it to be a Broad-billed Prion (*Pachyptila vittata*).

Unidentified prions were seen offshore by Wright each day in December 1975.

SOOTY SHEARWATER *Puffinus griseus*

Up to 100+ were seen at a time offshore throughout both days of my visit. Burrows of this species were found on the eastern and southwestern slopes (c.50 and c.30 respectively). Sooty Shearwaters were heard calling from two burrows behind Fan Shell Beach on the morning of 27 October. One bird was heard calling from overhead the same area on the night of 26 October.

Wright counted a total of 101 and 46 burrows respectively on each of his visits. The OSNZ party recorded the species as breeding with one record from onshore plus 50 birds offshore.

YELLOW-EYED PENGUIN *Megadyptes antipodes*

Two were seen on rocks at the western end of the island in the afternoon of 26 October and another was seen further to the south later the same day. All three birds appeared to be in prime condition. Despite extensive searching no evidence of current nesting was found, although I did find two unused nest sites against rocks near the top of a low coastal cliff.

Three adults, one immature and two chicks were recorded in January 1987 (OSNZ party).

BLUE PENGUIN *Eudyptula minor*

Eleven birds were seen, all at the western end of the island. Five were in the surf, one was in a tunnel of a small underground "stream", and five were on nests – four among *Scirpus nodosus* and one in a short burrow in a coastal bank. All five birds were on two eggs. Many other likely burrows were found.

The slopes at the western end of the island contained a network of tracks obviously used by Blue Penguins, as did to a lesser extent the area of rush and flax near Fan Shell Beach at the eastern end of the island.

Wright heard Blue Penguins calling from offshore in the late afternoon and evening during both his visits and recorded fresh droppings on tracks leading to all beaches. In August 1975 he found some birds in bracken and under rushes up to 20 m above sea level as well as one pair in a burrow. The OSNZ party saw one bird and reported the species as breeding.

AUSTRALASIAN GANNET *Morus serrator*

Wright found a corpse on the northeastern beach during his first visit. This is the only record.

BLACK SHAG *Phalacrocorax carbo*

One was seen to the south of Fan Shell Bay on 26 October. This is the only record.

PIED SHAG *P. varius*

Two were seen on rocks by the reef to the southwest of the island on 26 October. The OSNZ party saw three during their visit.

LITTLE BLACK SHAG *P. sulcirostris*

One seen on the reef to the southwest of the island during my visit is a new record for Centre Island.

STEWART ISLAND SHAG *Leucocarbo chalconotos*

Two groups were found – one of 14 birds (7 bronze phase) on 13 nests with 17 live downy chicks and 2 dead chicks on a ledge below the lighthouse, and the other of 22 adults (8 bronze phase) with 12 nests and 7 chicks on the next promontory to the east.

Sansom conservatively estimated 300 nests with 500 birds on one side of Kuru-kuru alone during her visit and, on the basis of advice from the (then) captain and crew of the MV *Wairua*, recorded the total colony as being "of over 600 nests".

Wright recorded no Stewart Island Shags on Kuru-kuru in August 1975 but located a colony on a bluff on the main island to the west of Kuru-kuru. He also counted 108 nests with fresh nesting material, 25 with no nesting

material and 74 disused. During his December visit he recorded 14 birds (9 bronze phase) on Kuru-kuru as well as 120 nests on the main island. His maximum count was 207 adults, subadults and flying young plus 8 downy chicks, and 7 eggs (in 4 nests). He estimated the total population as being no more than 600 birds. The OSNZ party recorded a total of 79 adults and 6 juveniles, with about 35% being bronze phase.

SPOTTED SHAG *Stictocarbo punctatus punctatus*

I counted 149 adults, 116 nests and 1 chick at 10 locations on the cliffs between the lighthouse and Fan Shell Beach. The OSNZ party counted 200 adults and 20 young during their visit.

BLUE SHAG *S. steadi*

Wright recorded 108 Blue Shags and 50+ nests during his August visit. In December he found some 200 nests and estimated the total population of Blue Shags on Centre island as about 700.

I saw no birds clearly of this subspecies.

WHITE-FACED HERON *Ardea novaehollandiae*

One flew over the airstrip on 26 October. The OSNZ party saw one.

AUSTRALASIAN HARRIER *Circus approximans*

I saw a single bird flying above the summit ridge and northern slopes on both days. Wright saw a single bird on his first visit and up to three on his second. The OSNZ party recorded two.

VARIABLE OYSTERCATCHER *Haematopus unicolor*

Six birds were seen during my visit – two at Fan Shell Beach, two on rocks to the southwest of Murderers Rock, and two on Duck Egg Beach.

Wright saw one pair on each visit and a downy chick on his second. The OSNZ party saw 12 adults and 2 juveniles.

SPUR-WINGED PLOVER *Vanellus miles novaehollandiae*

I saw two near the airstrip on both days. Wright saw two pairs during both his visits, and the OSNZ party saw one.

BANDED DOTTEREL *Charadrius bicinctus*

Four were seen during my stay – two on the northern beach and two to the southwest of Fan Shell Beach. Wright saw one bird on his second visit, and the OSNZ party saw four.

TURNSTONE *Arenaria interpres*

The 11 Turnstone seen by the OSNZ party is the only record.

BROWN SKUA *Catharacta skua lonnbergi*

Wright's report of finding a skua's midden on Green Island in August 1975 is the only record.

SOUTHERN BLACK-BACKED GULL *Larus dominicanus*

I recorded 47 around the island. None seemed to be nesting. Wright saw 25 during his first visit and a maximum of 18 on his second. The OSNZ party saw 16 adults and 7 juveniles.

RED-BILLED GULL *Larus novaehollandiae*

At least 20 birds were on the island. Four birds were on nests in a cave on Kuru-kuru.

Wright saw 89 birds roosting on Kuru-kuru in August plus a further 93 + about the island as well as 28 old nests and 5 addled eggs on Green Island. During his second visit he recorded 41 birds and breeding activity on Kuru-kuru, no sign of breeding on Green Island, six nests below the lighthouse, and another group on the cliff face on the south end of Duck Egg Beach. The OSNZ party saw a total of 20.

WHITE-FRONTED TERN *Sterna striata*

A total of 550 + White-fronted Terns were seen on Green Island and about the main island. Several pairs were seen to copulate but none appeared to be on eggs.

Sansom reported 30 White-fronted Terns nesting on Kuru-kuru and Wright saw a total of five birds during his December visit.

SOOTY TERN *Sterna fuscata*

The only record is a recently dead Sooty Tern found on a beach on the island in September 1986 by the (then) lighthouse keeper, Gary Schroeder. I confirmed the identification.

NEW ZEALAND PIGEON *Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*

Wright's record of 21 birds seen flying over the island towards Stewart island in December 1975 and the 15 birds recorded by the OSNZ party are the only records.

MOREPORK *Ninox novaeseelandiae*

A single bird heard by Wright in August 1975 is the only record.

SKYLARK *Alauda arvensis*

Skylarks were the most commonly recorded passerine during my visit, at least 20 birds being present. Wright found them common during both his visits, and the OSNZ party saw 20 + .

NEW ZEALAND PIPIT *Anthus novaeseelandiae*

I saw six on the more open areas of pasture. Wright had 11 confirmed sightings during his first visit and saw five on his second.

HEDGE SPARROW *Prunella modularis*

Wright recorded this species as being uncommon on each of his visits. These are the only records.

GREY WARBLER *Gerygone igata*

Wright's record of two Grey Warblers feeding in trees in the old garden in August 1975 is the only record.

NEW ZEALAND FANTAIL *Rhipidura fuliginosa*

Wright saw two pied form birds flying around the hedges by the houses in August 1975. This is the only record.

SONG THRUSH *Turdus philomelos*

I saw three close to the houses. Wright saw birds around houses, the airstrip, the old garden and heavy rush and bracken areas.

BLACKBIRD *T. merula*

At least four male and three female Blackbirds were on the island during my visit. Wright recorded the species as common all over the island on both his visits, but the OSNZ party saw only four birds.

SILVEREYE *Zosterops lateralis*

Wright found the species very common in August but few in December. These are the only records.

TUI *Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae*

A single bird seen by the OSNZ party is the only record.

YELLOWHAMMER *Emberiza citrinella*

I found Yellowhammers to be widespread and common on the island. Wright saw three birds in December 1975, and the OSNZ party reported four.

CHAFFINCH *Fringilla coelebs*

Single birds seen by me and the OSNZ party are the only records.

GREENFINCH *Carduelis chloris*

I saw two birds near the saddle west of the houses. The OSNZ party saw one.

GOLDFINCH *C. carduelis*

Wright's report of 12 flying over the old gardens in December is the only record.

REDPOLL *C. flammea*

I saw at least one group of five over rough pasture and rushes about the centre of the island. The OSNZ party saw at least two birds.

HOUSE SPARROW *Passer domesticus*

I saw three near the houses. Wright saw about 30 birds around the station in August 1975 and reported the species as breeding in houses and sheds in December. The OSNZ party saw at least 12 birds.

STARLING *Sturnus vulgaris*

Pairs and groups of up to eight were seen around the cliffs, and one dead bird was found inside the relief keeper's house during my stay.

Wright recorded 8 birds on his first visit and found the species common during his second. The OSNZ party saw at least 40 birds.

DISCUSSION

Much of the island's vegetation has been modified by introduced pasture grasses and grazing cattle and sheep since it was first occupied by lighthouse keepers. (Cattle and sheep were present during my visit.) The island, however, is still of high ecological value, especially for its saltmarsh vegetation, pingao, and Yellow-eyed Penguins.

Given that the island is free of introduced predators, other than kiore (*Rattus exulans*), recorded by Wright during both his visits, the removal of domestic stock may offer the best opportunity in Southland for restoring

Yellow-eyed Penguin habitat.

The number of Stewart Island Shags on the island has declined since Sansom's visit in 1955.

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SHORT NOTE

Pink-eared Duck at Mangere

Full tide in Manukau Harbour on 7 June 1990 being about 10 a.m., we decided to drive round the four ponds of the AMDB on what has become a more or less routine bird survey. There was little wind, the sky was overcast and there were periods of light drizzle. Visibility generally was poor.

On pond No. 4, which is the 'cleanest' of the ponds, the spraying of weeds on the larger islet and other engineering operations had been causing some disturbance among the thousands of ducks, mainly Mallard, Grey Teal and Shoveler, and to the waders which habitually use this large open water and its two islets as a refuge. In a quiet corner we had quickly found a pair of Shoveler with a few dozen Mallard; but soon we were examining a small duck with a very distinctive silhouette and puzzling over its identity. It was dwarfed by the Mallard and markedly smaller than the Shovelers. The group was about 120 metres distant. In the dull light, with field glasses alone, its bill seemed disproportionately large, even monstrous, on so small a body. Hence the suggestion in jest that it was a hybrid between a Grey Teal and a Shoveler; but it lacked the elegant lines and curves of a Grey Teal; and a little later we were scanning a flock of more than 400 of these over the sea-wall on the tide in the lee of Puketutu Island.

Two telescopes revealed more details of the plumage of the 'loner'. The face was whitish and the neck greyish. There was a dark patch around the eye extending down to the cheek. But most striking were the black and white near-vertical bars on the flank. They extended forward to the base of the neck. The vent was buffish or pale yellow. We surmised that the bird was not in full breeding plumage. None of us saw the small 'pink ears' which give this unique species its vernacular name. In good clear light, identification would have been easy.

GJE was the first to realise that this small duck with its unique jizz and bizarre pattern of plumage could only be the Australian Pink-eared Duck (*Malacorhynchus membranaceus*). This was confirmed when independently we were able to consult our own libraries.