

SHORT NOTE

An historic record of black petrels (*Procellaria parkinsoni*) nesting in south Westland

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Included in the voluminous papers of Sir Julius von Haast (1822-1887) held among the Haast family papers at the Alexander Turnbull Library (MS Papers 0037) is a series of about 64 letters (in Folders 56 and 57) written to him by William Docherty, mainly from Okarito between 1868 and 1874. During this period Docherty, about whom some details can be found in Haast (1948), Begg & Begg (1975), and Hill & Hill (1987), was actively collecting bird specimens for Haast, who became Director of the Canterbury Museum in 1869.

On 14 June (no year is given, but evidence in the letters establishes it as 1873), Docherty wrote to Haast from Okarito (MS Papers 0037, Folder 57, letter 32) on several matters, including:

"I think I told you in my last letter, that I intended to write you a letter about specimens but I missed the mail, I have made up an lot for you it is all I have got in the house or anywhere else, with the exception of two strange Birds the trip before last I got them on the Blue River Mountains about 15 miles south of the Paringa they are a large Black Birds with hooked beaks, they are young ones covered with a kind of down, the Native name is the Tiko, I think they are the Petrel but sometimes I think they are too large for that Bird, there is one or two feathers out of one of their wings but I have saved them. I had a long way to bring them to Okarito over seventy miles, the money I want for them is £4 for the two they are worth looking at it is no Mutton Bird *Swindle*, I had great deal of work in getting them to civilization, the mountains that I got them on were about the highest that I ever traveled over ...".

The "Blue" River to which Docherty referred is now usually known as the Moeraki River. Docherty made a number of journeys from Okarito to the Paringa area over the years. He informed Haast from Okarito on 14 January 1873 that he was starting south the following day, and that it would be 6 weeks before Haast would hear from him. On 2 March 1873, Docherty advised Haast of his very recent arrival at Okarito from the Paringa (MS Papers 0037, Folder 57, letters 5 & 7). Consideration of Docherty's letters to Haast confirms that this was the "trip before last" during which he obtained the young "tiko" specimens. There is no evidence that Docherty ever sent those specimens to Haast. Ron Scarlett (pers. comm.) was not able to find any record that the Canterbury Museum had received any "Black Petrels" from him.

The description of "large Black Birds with hooked beaks" of which the native name was "tiko" (= *taiko*) indicates that Docherty's birds were either young Westland petrels (*Procellaria westlandica*) or young black petrels (*Procellaria parkinsoni*). The black petrel is the only petrel having the Maori name *taiko* which is known to have nested on the New Zealand mainland into the historic period (Oliver 1955).

The Westland petrel is known to breed now only on coastal hills extending for some 10 km south of the Punakaiki River, but fossil bones found in caves in the area suggest that breeding colonies of the species may have extended north of the Punakaiki River in the Holocene (Worthy & Holdaway 1993). The Westland petrel breeds colonially during winter. Birds return to colonies between mid-February and mid-March, and the young fledge between 5 November and 26 December (Heather & Robertson 2000). Breeding of black petrels appears to be restricted now to Great Barrier and Little Barrier Islands. They breed colonially during summer. Birds

return to colonies between early October and December, and the young fledge between mid-April and July (Heather & Robertson 2000; M.J.Imber pers. comm.). Therefore, there can be no reasonable doubt that the 2 downy young *taiko* which Docherty collected in the hills near the Moeraki River in south Westland in late January or February of 1873 were black petrels.

There are acceptable records of black petrels nesting in the mountains of northwest Nelson until at least the end of the nineteenth century. Buller commissioned a special expedition by Charles Robinson and his son to the Heaphy area in 1891 to obtain great spotted kiwi (*Apteryx haastii*) (Galbreath 1989). Oliver (1955) later recorded that G. Robinson found black petrels in burrows each with an egg in the Heaphy Range on 19 December. In 1894, Buller (1895) reported receipt of the skin of a black petrel from Jonathan Brough, a Nelson surveyor. The bird had been killed in February on a dividing range between the head of the Heaphy River and Big River. It was found in a hole at the roots of a huge rata tree in dense forest. Brough was "quite satisfied that this bird is the 'Night Demon' of our diggers".

Fossil bones of 3 black petrels were recovered recently from a cave in the Punakaiki area. A radiocarbon date for some of those bones confirms that the black petrel was breeding near the Fox River into the period of human occupation (Worthy & Holdaway 1993). Indeed, the species appears to have been breeding in Westland until well into the historic period. Buller (1905-1906) recorded that the black petrel was "often met with at the diggers' camps far inland, in the Westland district, being attracted by the fire at night". Worthy & Holdaway (1993) quote Bartle (1977) who reported observations which they consider may indicate recent breeding of black petrels in the Paparoa Range. Docherty's record confirms that, until 1873 at the earliest, the breeding range of the black petrel extended at least as far south as the Moeraki River in south Westland.

There is no evidence that black petrels still nest in south Westland. Probably more than one factor was responsible for them ceasing to do so at some time during the past 129 years. Dogs, known predators of nesting petrels (Moors & Atkinson 1984), were no doubt a factor. Docherty informed Haast on 19 August 1871 that there were "dogs in the back

country now, gone wild from diggers", and, on 2 March 1873, that "they have stocked all the rivers right down to the Paringa with cattle, consequently the cattle dogs have destroyed the ground Birds". By the time Docherty wrote to Haast on 18 August 1873, diggers and their dogs were going through the country where he was collecting. Docherty informed Haast on 2 June 1874 that wild dogs and cattle had "played the deuce with the country" (MS Papers 0037, Folder 56, letter 27; Folder 57, letters 7, 10, 19).

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