

SHORT NOTES

Ensign Best's bird observations on Norfolk Island

Except for a small party sent ashore by Captain Cook when the island was discovered in 1774, no landing is known to have been made on Norfolk Island, or either of the other islands of the group, until February 1788, when Lt Gidley King arrived with a party of settlers and convicts under orders from the British Government to "secure the island".

Apart from an 11-year break between 1814 and 1825 the island was to remain a penal settlement for 66 years until 1854, eventually accommodating a population of over 2000, of which about 1800 were convicts.

During this period as a penal colony, the island was extensively modified with considerable effects on the native birds. Much of the island was affected directly by clearance for building and for agriculture, and the rest was indirectly affected by the deliberate liberation of domestic animals.

Although the island's birds are mentioned occasionally in the official records kept by the officers of the prison settlement, these observations were limited to species such as parakeets and Providence Petrels which in some way affected human life on the island.

While Norfolk Island was a penal colony, naturalists had little opportunity to visit the islands and, apart from the botanist Cunningham, who spent a short time there in May 1830, apparently none did so.

The private journals of Abel Dottin William Best were discovered in 1955 and published in 1966 (Nancy M. Taylor, ed. *The journal of Ensign Best 1837-1843*. Wellington; Govt Printer). These journals provide a valuable, if rather limited, insight into the birdlife of the islands during this critical part of their history.

Born into the English middle class in about 1815, Best enlisted as an officer in the British Army in 1837 and, until 1843, maintained a journal of his daily life.

Best spent some 19 months on Norfolk Island, arriving from New South Wales in August 1838 and departing for New Zealand in April 1840.

Unfortunately, for reasons unknown, the Norfolk Island section of his journal was maintained only for the first seven months. A further gap in his diary occurred, due to an unspecified illness, which reduces the account to a total of about 20 weeks. This is broken into approximately equal periods from 27 August to 2 November 1838 and from 2 February to 9 April 1839.

The first of these two periods is the more interesting ornithologically because it coincides with the breeding of most of the seabirds and the arrival of migrant waders from the Northern Hemisphere.

Like most of his fellow officers, Best's main spare-time occupations were riding, shooting and fishing, partly for the table but mainly for sport. However, Best's interests in things around him extended into many other fields

and, in keeping with the times, he appears to have been something of a collector, shooting terns and parakeets for their skins or for stuffing, and later preserving a collection of beetles.

By the time Best arrived, Norfolk Island had been in use as a penal colony for some 50 years and the effects of the deliberate introduction of pigs, goats and rabbits on Philip Island are already apparent in Best's writings.

During his first few months Best visited Philip Island with shooting parties and records returning with 50-100 rabbits on several occasions. He also referred to pigs, goats and feral chicken as present on Philip Island, although he does not record any of these being killed for food.

On Norfolk Island itself, feral wild cats were well established in the native bush and were already regarded as a serious pest because of their predations on the bird life. Wild cats were hunted by Best with his dogs and seven were killed by him over a 27-day period during September/October 1838. Best stated "you must know that the reason that I am so inveterate against them is that they destroy Quail and we intend introducing them again; it was tried once but the cats soon cleared them off."

Best made reference in the Norfolk Island section of his journal to 11 bird species, most of which can be identified with reasonable certainty. His comments on these 11 birds are summarised in the following list.

We may also perhaps draw some conclusions from Best's lack of reference to species which might reasonably have been expected to attract his attention. For example, he makes no mention of wild duck, although from numerous references in the New Zealand section of his journal he rated these highly for both sport and table, and it seems probably that wild duck were not on Norfolk Island at this time. It also seems likely that he would have observed and commented on the Norfolk Island Kaka (*Nestor productus*) had it been present, and his lack of reference to it may suggest that by 1838 it was already extinct, at least on Norfolk Island.

It is also interesting to note that, although Best had a range of domestic animals, including hens, ducks, geese, turkeys and pigs, he makes no mention of any problem with rats. This suggests that the large population of rats which caused so much trouble in the early days of settlement had been brought well under control by the time Best arrived on the island.

LIST OF SPECIES

WEDGE-TAILED SHEARWATER *Puffinus pacificus*

On 1 November 1838 Best recorded shooting a muttonbird near Steele's Point while his companions took two on a small island nearby. The following day Best and a fellow officer captured two more on an island off Duncombe Bay.

The time of year indicates that it was the Wedge-tailed Shearwater to which best referred rather than the winter-breeding Bird of Providence (*Pterodroma solandri*), which was almost certainly extinct on Norfolk Island some years before Best's arrival.

RED-TAILED TROPICBIRD *Phaethon rubricauda*

After returning from the island off Duncombe Bay on 2 November

1838, Best stated that "McLean and I returned to the hut whilst Storey went to catch some Boatswains. In an hour or more he returned with three".

MASKED BOOBY *Sula dactylatra*

Best made a single reference to a young 'Gannet' being captured on an island off Duncombe Bay on 2 November 1838.

FERAL CHICKEN *Gallus gallus*

Of a day spent on Philip Island on 12 October 1838, Best recorded that "we all heard the crowing of the wild fowls but only one cock was seen".

LEAST GOLDEN PLOVER *Pluvialis fulva*

Best's entry for 18 September 1838 reads "After breakfast went down to the Bay to shoot plover and curlew, we killed about 10 brace." On 28 September he again recorded shooting plover in Emily Bay but on this occasion "only killed a very few".

Although 'plover' could be interpreted as referring to several other wader species which occur on Norfolk Island, the Least Golden Plover appears most likely to be the bird intended. It is the commonest wader occurring on the island, the September date is appropriate, and it has a close similarity with the European Golden Plover (*C. apricarius*), with which someone of Best's background would probably be familiar.

WHIMBREL *Numenius phaeopus*

On 18 September 1838, Best recorded shooting 'curlew' together with plover at Emily Bay.

Although the Eastern Curlew (*Numenius madagascariensis*) has been seen rarely on Norfolk Island, Best's observation probably refers to the Whimbrel, which is an annual visitor to the island and to other islands in the SW Pacific.

SOOTY TERN *Sterna fuscata*

On 1 November 1838, Best recorded the capture of three 'Black and White Swallows' from islands off Steele's Point and on the following day the capture of three more from an island off Duncombe Bay. Best stated on 2 November that the birds had "done hatching".

COMMON NODDY *Anous stolidus* or

BLACK NODDY *Anous minutus*

In his entry for 1 November 1838, Best recorded shooting a pair of 'slate-coloured birds' near Steele's Point and the capture of a third by his companions on an adjacent island.

Although one of the noddies is clearly intended, one cannot be certain which species is referred to as both are about the island in October/November.

WHITE TERN *Gygis alba*

Best's entry for 1 November 1838 states "we went first to Steele's Point for White Swallows, they were too wild however to allow themselves to be knocked down and out of four I shot only one was fit for stuffing".

NORFOLK ISLAND PIGEON *Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae spadicea*

This pigeon was clearly still quite common on the main island in Best's time. During the brief period of his records, Best, either alone or with one of his companions, killed at least 72 during 17 hunting expeditions. The largest bag was 25 taken by two men on 18 September 1838.

In the New Zealand part of his journal, Best used as synonyms the terms *Pigeon*, *Wood Pigeon* and *Wood Quest* when referring to the New Zealand Pigeon (*Hemiphaga n. novaeseelandiae*).

I have therefore assumed that his references to pigeons and wood quests on Norfolk Island relate to the *Hemiphaga* pigeon rather than the dove (*Gallicolumba* (?) *norfolkiensis*), both of which are now extinct.

NORFOLK ISLAND PARAKEET *Cyanoramphus novaeseelandiae cookii*

Best recorded shooting five or six 'Lowries' in the bush at Ball's Bay on 21 September 1838, but on the following day he wrote "Got up at six to skin my birds, found them all too much shot about the body so cut off the wings and tail."

An editorial footnote to this entry, probably attributable to the late Sir Robert Falla, states "Any kind of parakeets would be loosely referred to as Lowries".

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Asiatic Dowitcher at the Heathcote-Avon Estuary, Christchurch

On 29 August 1985, Andrew Crossland visited the Heathcote-Avon estuary and found a wader that was unfamiliar to him.

The next day, Peter Langlands found the same bird on the western shore of the estuary and compared it with the Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*) it was associating with. The bird was observed again by AC and PL for about one hour on 4 September. It was identified as a dowitcher (*Limnodromus* sp.) and other local observers were informed of the sighting.

On 6 September JF and JF found the bird in the same place feeding on the tidal mudflats with both Bar-tailed Godwit and five Asiatic Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa melanuroides*).

The dowitcher associated closely with the Bar-tailed Godwit, which it resembled in general colouring. However, the dowitcher could easily be distinguished by its smaller size, darker back, straight bill and different feeding technique.

The dowitcher was estimated to be about two-thirds the size of the Bar-tailed Godwit. Bar-tailed Godwits vary considerably in size, but the dowitcher was smaller than any of the godwit present.

Its back was grey-brown, and the lighter feather edgings made it look streaked. A dark brown patch at the bend of the wing was a feature noted by all of the observers. The nape was light brown and finely streaked. Its crown was grey-brown, and it had a light superciliary stripe and a darker eyestripe. No eye ring was distinguished.

The underparts were whitish with light brown barring on the flanks and under the tail. The tail looked brown, and the rump was pale with brown