

SHORT NOTES

BLACK-BILLED GULL FOOD PREFERENCES

In late November 1983, I was helping my son sow his swede crop on his Hokonui farm in Southland. My job was to ride on the back of the ridger and watch the seed boxes. The day being fine and calm, I sat on the machine facing backwards and watched the Black-billed Gulls feeding as they followed the machine. All day, a constantly changing flock of 40-60 birds followed closely, often at arms length, and I was in a good position to observe. Presumably most of the flock were breeding birds, the nearest breeding colony being on the Oreti River bed 12 km away.

Most of what the birds were feeding on was too small for me to see, but any grass grubs or porina grubs were eaten. Although earthworms were plentiful they were not taken. Twice during the day I saw a gull pick up a worm but promptly drop it.

With over 200 000 Black-billed Gulls in Southland, it is interesting to contemplate the volume of agricultural pests they take annually.

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FAIRY MARTIN AT CAPE REINGA

On the morning of 30 November 1983, during a visit to Cape Reinga, we noticed a small swallow-like bird with a white rump flying around the lighthouse buildings with a group of Welcome Swallows. After we had watched it for several minutes, it flew close enough for us to pick out the rusty-red colour of its head, identifying it as a Fairy Martin. Eventually it settled on the roof of the post office building (in spite of some harassment from the larger Welcome Swallows), and we were able to watch it in bright sunlight through binoculars from about 10 metres away. We could then see that the reddish coloration of the head extended on to the upper breast and had a faintly streaked appearance, particularly under the chin. The black tail contrasted strongly with the pale belly and white rump and was only slightly forked. The wings were black above, paler underneath, and relatively shorter than those of the swallows. In all we watched it for about half an hour. This sighting is particularly interesting in view of the sighting of other Fairy Martins in New Zealand earlier in the year.

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