

SHORT NOTES

A Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) on Little Barrier Island

At about 22:00 on 30 June 1992, Gerald and Janet Cubitt (visitors from the UK) saw and photographed a large pale owl near the west landing at Little Barrier Island (36°13'S 175°03'E). GC said that the bird looked like a Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*), and noted that a Morepork (*Ninox novaeseelandiae*) which landed nearby was smaller.

After dark on 1 July we searched the area where the owl had been seen the previous night, and eventually found it at 21:20 in a small grove of kanuka (*Kunzea ericoides*). We observed it closely with a spotlight and binoculars until 22:40. It was clearly a Barn Owl, and appeared to be in excellent condition. During this time it was quite active, doing a low sweeping flight over the grazed pasture and then returning to the kanukas, where it made short flights from branch to branch as if searching for prey. It also regurgitated a pellet which contained fur and bone fragments of kiore (*Rattus exulans*). At one point it descended towards a crotch about one metre above the ground and extracted a small kiore, which it probably cached earlier. The rat fell to the ground and the owl followed and began to consume it there. It tore off and swallowed a few small pieces, and then ate the rest whole. While it ate, a Morepork arrived and watched from less than ten metres away.

In Australia the diet of Barn Owls consists mostly of small mammals, small birds and night-flying insects (Frith 1969). During July, trapping indicated that kiore were especially numerous in the rank grassland of the ungrazed portions of the flat. The Barn Owl would have had a plentiful food supply.

The owl was seen several times during July and August. On 18 September, Sue Moore found its daytime roost in a dense copse of kanuka about 200 metres from where it was first seen. There were many pellets containing kiore fur on the ground below the branches where it was roosting at a height of about three metres. All around the roost numerous moulted pale contour feathers were caught up in the kanuka brush. The owl was easily approached, and remained at its roost while being sketched from a few metres away. It was last seen during the first week of October in the same area.

A Barn Owl was seen in June 1992 at Whenuapai Airport about 80 km southwest of Little Barrier (Taylor & Parrish 1994). Michael Taylor tells us that this bird is assumed to have been accidentally transported from Australia in an Orion aircraft. It was apparently healthy when seen. It is possible that the Whenuapai and Little Barrier birds were the same individual. If not, these were the seventh and eighth records of this species in New Zealand (Turbott 1990, Guest 1990).

LITERATURE CITED

- FRITH, H.J. 1969. (ed.). Birds in the Australian High Country. A.H. & A.W. Reed, Sydney.
GUEST R. 1990. 1990 report on rare birds in New Zealand. Notornis 38: 240-244.
TAYLOR, G.A.; PARRISH, G.R. 1994. Classified Summarised Notes, North Island 1 July 1992 to 30 June 1993. Notornis 41: 235-274.

TURBOTT, E.G. (Convenor) 1990. Checklist of the Birds of New Zealand, and the Ross Dependency, Antarctica. Random Century, Auckland.

CHRIS SMUTS-KENNEDY, *c/o Department of Conservation, Waikato Conservancy, Private Bag 3072, Hamilton, New Zealand*

TIM LOVEGROVE, *47 Pupuke Road, Birkenhead, Auckland 10, New Zealand*

Received 29 July 1995

Accepted 14 December 1995



The calls of Murphy's Petrel (*Pterodroma ultima*)

Described in 1949 on the basis of specimens obtained in 1922 by the Whitney Expedition (Murphy 1949), Murphy's Petrel *Pterodroma ultima* is one of the less well-known gadfly petrels. The first detailed account of the breeding biology of this central south Pacific species was based on studies in the Pitcairn Islands by Brooke (1995) who did not, however, provide information on the species' calls.

The usefulness of calls as an aid to understanding petrel relationships is being increasingly recognized (Bretagnolle 1995). However, although Imber (1985) used calls as one character in his major study of *Pterodroma* phylogeny, he did not document Murphy's Petrel calls, and did not mention Holyoak & Thibault's (1984) description of calls they had heard in French Polynesia. "During display, the voice of the birds is less resonant than that of *P. neglecta* or *P. arminjoniana*. It consists of a series of fairly rapid notes: *Ouin-bi-bi-bi*, *Hou-bou-bou-bou*, *Ki-ki-ki*, this last call being fairly shrill" [My translation from the French].

This description does not match closely those calls I heard on the Pitcairn Islands during the 1991 breeding season (Brooke 1995), and therefore this note describes the calls of Murphy's Petrels heard on the breeding islands of Ducie, Henderson and Oeno.

Two calls were heard, recorded, and then analysed using a Kay DSP Sonagraph (Model 5500-1). Examples are provided in Figure 1. The first call was a soft owl-like hoot (Williams 1960; Fig. 1a) that was usually uttered on the ground, often while a pair was allopreening in the pre-breeding period. To make the sound the petrel did not open its bill, although the throat pulsed in time with the call. When the call was given in the air, the bird arched backwards and flew with characteristic shallow fluttering wingbeats. This call might be rendered *hoo-hoo-hoo-hoooooooooooo*, the final syllable lasting about 3 seconds. In my opinion, it would not be termed "fairly rapid" (see above). I have no definite observations of both members of a pair giving this call simultaneously, and therefore the call may be given by birds of only one gender.

The second call (Fig. 1b), given with an open bill, was a tri- or quadri-syllabic yelping cry, usually with the stress on the first syllable. This call was heard both from