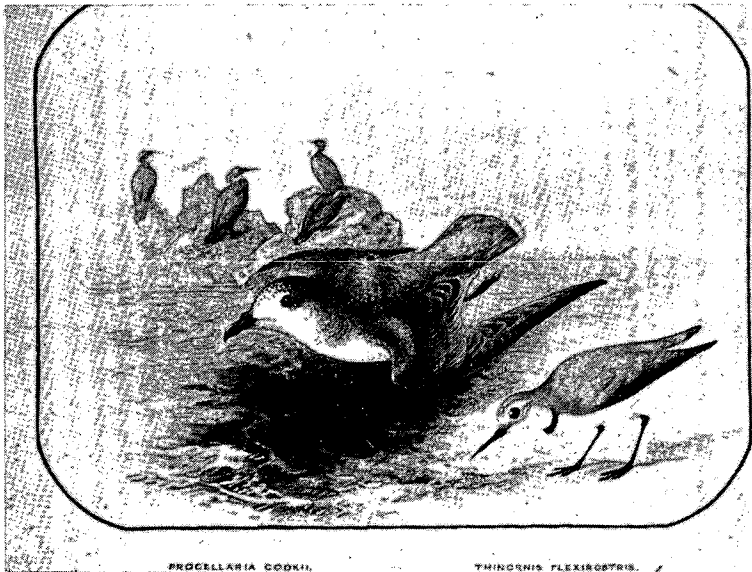


A PETREL PUZZLE

The puzzle begins on page 366 of Buller's *History of the birds of New Zealand*, first edition 1873, where the author stated that the only known specimen of Blue Petrel (*Halobaena caerulea*) in the country was in the Auckland Museum. The specimen cannot be traced; nor was Sylvia Reed able to find any record of its accession, which is not surprising in view of the Museum's early vicissitudes, including three or four shifts. The earliest specimen now in the Auckland Museum is labelled "Tamaki River 8/8/1924."

On the next page, 307, Buller, confessing a lamentable lack of information about Cook's Petrel (*Pterodroma cookii*), which at that time he had never encountered, wrote "Captain Hutton informs me that there is a specimen in the collection of the Rev. R. Laishley at Auckland."

The plate numbered 45 in the Laishley folder, BMNH, is a graceful composition. The top left-hand corner is occupied by a quartet of large shags, not named but almost certainly *P. carbo*, resting on rocks. Diametrically opposite, a Wrybill examines the beach, leaning forward with extended neck. Laishley must surely have sketched Wrybills on the tidal flats near Onehunga. The name given by the artist in the subtitle is most intriguing. Where did he find *Thinornis flexirostris*, which means literally 'beach bird with bent bill'?



By courtesy of British Museum of Natural History. Painted probably c. 1867 at Onehunga

and is very apt? No such name appears in Ellman's egregious 1861 list nor in Buller's 1873 synonymy. Did he invent it himself?

The centre of the plate is dominated by an exquisite painting of a Blue Petrel, although the bird is actually named as *Procellaria cookii*. In his 'Gleanings,' Laishley noted that "the tail terminates with a band of white about half an inch in breadth." He was too sharp-eyed a naturalist to miss such a diagnostic feature. He also remarked that, although Buller spoke of Cook's Petrel as rare, "we think this bird has been taken more than once in the Manukau Harbour;" and indeed it still crashes on the Auckland isthmus in autumn when young Cook's Petrels are leaving Little Barrier in misty weather and become dazzled by city lights. If Laishley had been able to examine the two species side by side, he would have noted the differences at once.

Being so impressed both by the delicacy of Laishley's painting and by its historic significance, I asked if I might order a colour transparency. My request was courteously received. When later back in New Zealand I showed the slide to several competent judges, all agreed that the central subject of Laishley's skilful watercolour was indeed a Blue Petrel and not, as it was labelled, a Cook's Petrel. In the 1860s most of the smaller truly oceanic tubenoses were still a closed book. We should be grateful for the picture and readily forgive the mistaken identification. We can be certain that Laishley handled and possibly possessed a good specimen of a storm-wrecked Blue Petrel.

Two earlier paintings of *Halobaena caerulea* have come to my notice. The first, showing a bird in flight over a grey-green sea, was done by George Forster towards the end of 1773 on Cook's second voyage. A faithful reproduction appeared in *Vogel der Sudsee. Segelfahrt mit Georg Forster*. His *Blauer Sturmvogel* preceded Laishley's painting by nearly a century.

The second appeared as plate 52, J. Gould and H. C. Richter, *del et lith*, in Vol. 7 1848 of *Birds of Australia*. Two Blue Petrels are shown squatting on what may be an ice-floe or greenish-topped rocks.

As far as I know the only published drawing of a Wrybill which precedes that of Laishley is reproduced in the *Zoology of the voyage of the Astrolabe*, Quoy & Gaimard 1830. It is a hand-coloured engraving by I. G. Pretre.

During his Onehunga period, 1860-68, Laishley was not short of original material to satisfy both the artist and the naturalist in him.

R. B. SIBSON, 26 Entrican Avenue, Remuera, Auckland