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SHORT NOTE

WRECK OF KERGUELEN AND BLUE PETRELS

In September 1981 occurred the heaviest recorded wreck of Kerguelen Petrels (*Pterodroma brevirostris*) and Blue Petrels (*Halobaena caerulea*). Several hundreds of dead birds were found on many North Island west coast beaches. Some were blown into the harbours of Wellington and Auckland, a few were blown inland, and one Kerguelen finished up at Tapu in the Firth of Thames. More Blues than Kerguelens were found. Several Kerguelens came in alive, and various people and especially the Auckland Zoo tried to nurture them back to health. But as with most small petrels picked up starving and exhausted, all died after a few days. Larger seabirds such as mollymawks and giant petrels stand more chance of recovery, but members should beware of lightly taking on caring for them as it requires much time, patience and understanding.

Watching seabirds from the shore can be frustrating and eye-straining; but what excitement on 8 September at Muriwai, in a strong south-westerly and frequent heavy rain was the close view (10-15 m) of Kerguelen and Blue Petrels in flight over the surf and the shoreline.

No problem of trying to hold binoculars steady on a heaving boat's deck when watching from a land rover, keeping pace with the birds. The flight of the Kerguelen Petrel was steeply undulating with quick twists and turns; features most noticeable were the very high 'dished' forehead, the long wings in proportion to the stocky body, and the narrow sideways-compressed bill. The flight of the Blue Petrels was dainty, and the white tip of the tail showed distinctly.

Extra beach patrols in the Auckland region produced many reasonably fresh specimens. From those collected, 26 Kerguelen and 27 Blue Petrels were examined and partly dissected. Except for one Kerguelen, all were classed as adult, based on the ends of the tibias, which were entirely fused. This does not necessarily mean that the birds were fully mature. Only one male of each species had gonads approaching breeding condition, and equal female condition was found in only three female Blue Petrels.

One Kerguelen Petrel, known to have been force fed, had its gut full of undigested fish but nothing in its gizzard. This would support the theory that birds reach a point of exhaustion beyond which they cannot absorb food.

Of the 26 Auckland specimens of Kerguelen Petrel, 17 were males and 9 were females (one male with gonads 8.8 x 4.2 mm). Of the 27 Blue Petrels, 17 were males and 10 were females (one male with gonads 9.6 x 6.8 mm). The sample was probably too small for the sex proportions to be significant.

More interesting were the gizzard contents. Except for two Blue Petrels, all contained squid beaks. Every Blue Petrel also had plastic pellets of varying size and number; most also had pieces of pumice, and a few had unidentifiable vegetable remains, probably algae. Oddities were a kowhai seed, a piece of flat green plastic, and a rubber ring of the kind used for castrating lambs. Only one Kerguelen Petrel contained a plastic pellet. This must surely indicate that Blue Petrels are mainly surface feeders, but not the Kerguelens.

In October, these two species were still being found by beach patrollers, but no more fresh specimens came to hand. In this wreck, the weather was certainly a contributing factor, but this is not always so. With other large seabird wrecks, for example, that of Fulmars (*Fulmarus glacialisoides*) in 1975, weather conditions were not unusual.

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