

## **SEASONAL FISHING BY GANNETS IN MANUKAU HARBOUR**

**By R. B. SIBSON**

On the west coast the nearest long-established ganntries to Manukau Harbour are Oaia, about 15 miles north from the Heads and Gannet Island off Kawhia, about 60 miles to the south. More recently in the 1970s surplus Gannets (*Sula bassana serrator*), presumably from Oaia, began prospecting the Sugarloaf, also known as The Stack or Pillar Rock, which at low tide is linked to the mainland at the southern end of Muriwai beach (Reed 1979). By 1980 the Sugarloaf population had reached saturation point and every year now young adults are hopefully investigating nearby ledges on the mainland itself.

Gannets are not truly pelagic. They take most of their food in the comparatively shallow waters of the coastal shelf. When they enter Manukau Harbour and have passed Puponga Point they may take one of three main channels where the water flows strongly four times a day as tides rise and fall. The northern channel, Purakau, leads eastwards past Puketutu Island to Onehunga and so to the extensive shallows above Mangere Bridge. The central channel bears south-east to the Narrows between Karaka Pt and Weymouth and then broadens with many branching creeks. A third important channel heads south past Mako and Kauri Points, along the inner coast of Awhitu Peninsula to Waiuku.

This note is based on jottings from the personal observations of Ross McKenzie and myself made over 40 years and from census returns going back to the 1950s. To the sheltered waters of Manukau, Gannets seem to be seasonal visitors, being scarce between mid-September and May and most numerous from mid-winter to early spring, with a peak in August. On 15 out of 20 summer censuses (1961-1980) none was recorded at all; and the average for the other five counts was only two. It may be significant that in January 1942 when I spent some days on the Awhitu Peninsula, White-fronted Terns (*Sterna striata*), but no Gannets, were seen daily fishing the Waiuku Channel. Yet in September, as I travelled by launch from Onehunga to Orua Bay seven Gannets were seen; and between 6 and 10 September, a few Gannets but no White-fronted Terns, fished the Waiuku Channel every day.

On 20/8/54 I watched at least 20 Gannets fishing close to Mangere Bridge. At one time, as seven were circling and plunging into a smaller bay, some Pied Shags (*Phalacrocorax varius*), which had been resting on a basalt reef, flew across to join in the hunt. All the

Gannets were adults with richly golden napes. A few gulls were attracted by the commotion. On 28/8/67, about full tide, ten or more Gannets were soaring high near Onehunga and above Mangere bridge. On 17/8/68, when the NZ Ecological Society was meeting in Auckland and there was an excursion to AMDB ponds, a dozen or more Gannets near Puketutu Island were watched with some interest as they flew in low circles and made shallow dives. Other significant sightings for August are c.200 off Seagrove on 13/8/61, 40 on 1/8/65, and 40+ on 19/8/66 along the Karaka coast.

Observations such as these prompted me to collate such material as I could find. Doubtless a regular watcher at Huia would log a few Gannets at almost any season over the deep narrow channel inside the Heads, as is shown, for example, by three at Huia on 15/10/67, eight at Weymouth on 10/5/66 (HRMCK), and four in mid-harbour off the end of Mangere airport on 8/4/74. But few seem to penetrate far up the channels till June, when hungry gatherings suddenly become conspicuous, especially along the Waiuku Channel, e.g. 40 off Glenbrook on 14/6/53, when the count for the whole harbour was only 47. Similarly, on 14/6/64, out of a census total of 112, 80 were along the Waiuku Channel or off Pollok Spit and 30 reached Weymouth. On 5/6/66, when 102 Gannets were logged, there was a lively swirl of 58 over the Weymouth 'Narrows,' where on 17/6/61 HRMCK had recorded an impressive 170+. A rather interesting record is of four on 2/6/58 riding out a westerly gale in the lee of Puketutu on the calm surface of AMDB pond No. 4 before it had become unsavoury. For 11 censuses taken in June, the average is 28.

Since August seems to be the peak month, it is a little surprising that for July the average number logged on 12 censuses is only 13. A note by Ross McKenzie reads, "Weymouth 27/7/57. A few about most days." On 8/7/66, at least 18 were enjoying good fishing between Puketutu and Hillsborough. On 11/7/79, Ross noted 30+ near Weymouth; and on 5/7/81, 52 followed the tide past Karaka to the Narrows. July is certainly a month when Gannets may be plentiful on the Manukau.

The obvious decline in September is not unexpected. By then some adults are already incubating eggs, and most are busy at their colonies, building nests and defending sites. September Gannets in Manukau may well be young adults which will either nest later in the season or not at all. On 20/9/63, a few were noted at Weymouth (HRMCK) and on 2/9/66 eight were off Puketutu.

Since most young Gannets in mottled brown plumage quickly leave local waters and head westwards towards Australia, they are rarely seen within the Heads and the small number of sightings is not surprising. The only record I have been able to find is of one near Weymouth on 15/3/58 (HRMCK). However, on the outer coast the corpses of fledglings that have failed to survive their first flights are washed ashore every autumn.

When Gannets are most numerous 'over the Manukau,' the Tasman Sea is at its most inhospitable and they are free from territorial cares. The major wrecks of the truly oceanic Tubinares usually occur towards the end of the winter, and the broad expanse of Manukau Harbour offers comparative shelter. Are June to August also the peak months for Gannets within Kaipara, Raglan and Kawhia Harbours?

Such numbers as I have quoted must be lured by good fishing. What species of fish are shoaling in such numbers that swirls of apparently ravenous Gannets engage in a frenzy of diving? Without being specific, Oliver (1955) mentions "garfish, herrings and young mullet." The new *Birds of the Western Palaearctic* enumerates at least 15 species of fish taken by British Gannets (*S. b. bassana*). The fish range in length from 2.5 to 30.5 cm. Evidently hungry Gannets don't despise tiddlers. Have we among our members some budding ichthyologist who will tell us precisely what species of fish our Gannets are hunting when they follow the tides in the main channels of Manukau Harbour?

#### REFERENCES

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### SHORT NOTE

#### A CRESTED TERN IN HAWKES BAY

On 23 April 1981, during a beach patrol, after an easterly gale, between Westshore and Bay View, north of Napier, Rosalie Giblin, Cara Saxby and I came on a small group of White-fronted Terns (*Sterna striata*) with a larger tern in their midst.

The larger tern was similar in build to a White-fronted but smaller and less plump than a Caspian Tern (*Hydroprogne caspia*). The plumage of back and wings was a darker grey than the pearl-grey of the White-fronted Terns; breast, abdomen, face, and back of neck were white; and a white patch showed on the wing near the carpal joint. The forehead was white, merging through speckled grey into a blackish-brown crown, which was rather pointed at the back and protruded slightly whenever the wind ruffled the crown feathers. The bill was greenish yellow, about 6 cm long, and powerful looking. The legs were blackish.

We studied the bird for about 20 minutes, but missed it in flight when passing gulls put the tern flock to flight.

This bird was later identified as a Crested Tern (*Sterna bergii*), the fifth record for New Zealand.

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