

A Biology of Birds - with particular reference to New Zealand birds

Foreward

For two centuries and more, man's interest in birds has formed a link between the layman and the scientist. From the time of Gilbert White, birdwatching has been "the most scientific of sports or the most sporting of sciences", in E. M. Nicholson's words. It has become the recreation of thousands of people who have had no pretence to be classed as biologists - of schoolmaster and cleric, journalist and statesman, seaman and artist. Yet many who became interested for aesthetic motives have found their experience more rewarding when their field observations were oriented by the systematic study of behaviour, life-history, distribution or migration. From the pleasure of watching wild birds, it is a short step to making discoveries about them. In nearly every country today, amateur birdwatchers and professional ornithologists work as a team and the joys of field observation and discovery are enhanced by the intellectual satisfaction of taking part in a serious survey or inquiry. Birds are perhaps the best known of all animals, and their study has made vital contributions to human understanding of life and its evolution, through the interpretations of ornithologists like David Lack, Ernst Mayr and Robert Cushman Murphy.

When I was a boy, textbooks on the biology of birds were based on English or American experience, and in New Zealand the gap between the work of inspired field naturalists like Guthrie-Smith and the intellectual heritage of biological fact and theory was hard to bridge. This book by Barrie Heather will fill a need long felt for an authoritative account of bird biology based on New Zealand examples. Originally prepared as a chapter in "Biology for Sixth Forms" (1963), it is now offered by the Ornithological Society of New Zealand to a much wider public. The author has been a keen birdwatcher since his school days, and his approach combines a naturalist's dedication with a scholar's discipline.

"A Biology of Birds" will enable zoologists to learn something of the New Zealand avifauna, but will be especially valuable to the amateur ornithologist in this country. The amateur plays a special role in the science of ornithology. This is particularly so in New Zealand, where professional bird biologists are perilously few, and the demand for knowledge and understanding is accentuated by the pressing needs for conservation of our distinctive wild-life in an environment that continues to change with a developing national economy.

The organisation in which the amateur joins with the professional to study New Zealand birds is, of course, the Ornithological Society of New Zealand, which has gone from strength to strength ever since Professor B. J. Marples called the first annual meeting of enthusiasts in 1940. The Society's activities are described in the Appendix, which has been specially written for this volume. I would have liked an index, but this has been omitted to keep the cost down. For the same reason the original section on practical work remains, in the belief that it will be just as useful to amateur ornithologists as it was for school classes.

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October 9, 1966.