



Photo: From colour slide by R. N. Holdaway

ROYAL SPOONBILLS NESTING NEAR BLENHEIM

In November 1979, four pairs of Royal Spoonbill (*Platalea regia*) were found nesting at two sites in the Vernon Lagoons area, near Blenheim, Marlborough. At one site three pairs deserted after hatching (R. Frost, pers. comm.), but at another site (Fig. 1) a fourth pair raised one chick. Later a pair was found on a nest near the first site, but this nest was also deserted. In January 1980 three pairs were found occupying nests at the site where successful breeding had occurred; the young bird from this first successful nest had not yet flown and was still being fed within a few metres of the nest. Two pairs, including one using the original nest, each raised a chick and the remaining pair deserted from the nest most exposed to waves built up by the prevailing north-west winds. Both fledglings were seen on the nests in mid-February 1980. Therefore, three young birds altogether were raised in the 1979-80 season.

The successful nestings all occurred at a colony of Pied Shags (*Phalacrocorax varius*) on logs at the confluence of the Opawa and Wairau rivers. All were in nests originally built and used by Pied Shags. The four unsuccessful nests were all built on the ground in or near a large colony of Black-backed Gulls (*Larus dominicanus*) on a low island 2.5 km from the Pied Shag colony. Ground nesting of spoonbills has been recorded elsewhere, e.g. Europe, North Africa, and Australia; in New Zealand the previous sites have been high in standing trees, especially kahikatea. Breeding in association with other species is apparently quite common with spoonbills, but in Marlborough the birds have successfully used nests built by another species.

One of the non-breeding Royal Spoonbills present in the area during the 1979-80 summer had the dark-tipped primaries of a juvenile in its first year. This presence of a juvenile may indicate that breeding had occurred unnoticed in the area in at least the previous season. This known juvenile was one of a group of four non-breeding birds, without crests and with no yellow on the upper breast, which were present near the colony during the 1979-80 season. All four were at the colony together with the four breeding pairs and one fledgling on 13 January 1980.

The nesting pairs tolerated human activity close to the colony, such as fishing boats and casual visitors and it is hoped that they will breed again at this site if disturbance does not increase.

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FIGURE 1 — Royal Spoonbills at nest site, Vernon Lagoons, 2 January 1980.

The bird on the right is the first chick raised in the 1979-80 season; note the short bill. An adult is standing on the nest in which the chick was raised. This and the nest above and to the right, occupied by a Pied Shag, were used by the successful pairs later in January 1980.