

ESTABLISHMENT OF A NEW GANNETRY

By SYLVIA REED

In 1975 a new gannetry was begun on a flat-topped stack, known locally as the Sugarloaf Rock (Fig. 1), which lies about 30 m offshore from coastal cliffs between Maori Bay and the flat fishing-rock at the south end of the main Muriwai Beach, some 30 km west of Auckland. For many years the Australasian Gannet (*Sula bassana serrator*) has bred on Oaia Island (Fig. 2 & 5), just under 2 km to seaward of the mainland at this point; the breeding population in 1946-47 according to Fleming & Wodzicki (1952, *Notornis* 5: 60) was 338 pairs, plus about 168 roosting birds.

The Sugarloaf was a fairly regular breeding place of White-fronted Terns (*Sterna striata*) until 1973 when gannets began to prospect (Fig. 3 & 4). The rock has a shelving top sloping towards the mainland with a clump of pohuehue (*Muehlenbeckia complexa*) forming a central peak on the seaward side. Most of the top of the stack can be overlooked from the mainland which provides an excellent vantage point for observation.

On 22 October 1975, one gannet was seen to land on the rock, carrying seaweed which it used for the first stage of nest-building. Two days later up to 28 birds were present, performing greeting ceremonies, gathering nesting material and mating. Numbers rose rapidly during the next two weeks, up to 120 on 7 November, with at least 12 nests completed, 3 of them containing eggs. Birds from the colony were seen collecting seaweed below the stack throughout November. By 22 November, 28 nests were occupied, spread over most of the top of the rock (Fig. 5). Many birds used the grass growing on the rock as nest material until this was exhausted. The nests were then raised with surrounding earth.

The first chick was noted on 24 December 1975. On 7 January 1976, 3 fluffy chicks and 60 adults were counted. The following April, two young members of OSNZ managed to climb the rock — a very hazardous undertaking — and banded 16 juveniles.

In the early part of the season, some 50 White-fronted Terns had attempted to nest on the ledges on the sides of the rock, but gave up before any eggs were laid. The terns have appeared, settled a short while, then left, each year since.

The next season (1976-77) nesting began much earlier. On 1 October 1976, 130 gannets and 30 nests were observed. 78 White-fronted Terns were present but they very rarely landed on top near the gannets. One pair of Red-billed Gulls (*Larus scopulinus*) nested in the pohuehue. In March 1977, 61 juvenile and 83 adult gannets were counted.

Earliest observations for the next season (1977-78) record 50 birds on 7 August, taking up nest territory, performing sky-pointing



FIGURE 1 — Sugarloaf Rock, looking south towards Maori Bay from the fishing platform, Muriwai. Photo: Olaf Petersen



FIGURE 2 — Gannets on Oaia Island, January 1957, showing crowded conditions. Photo: Olaf Petersen

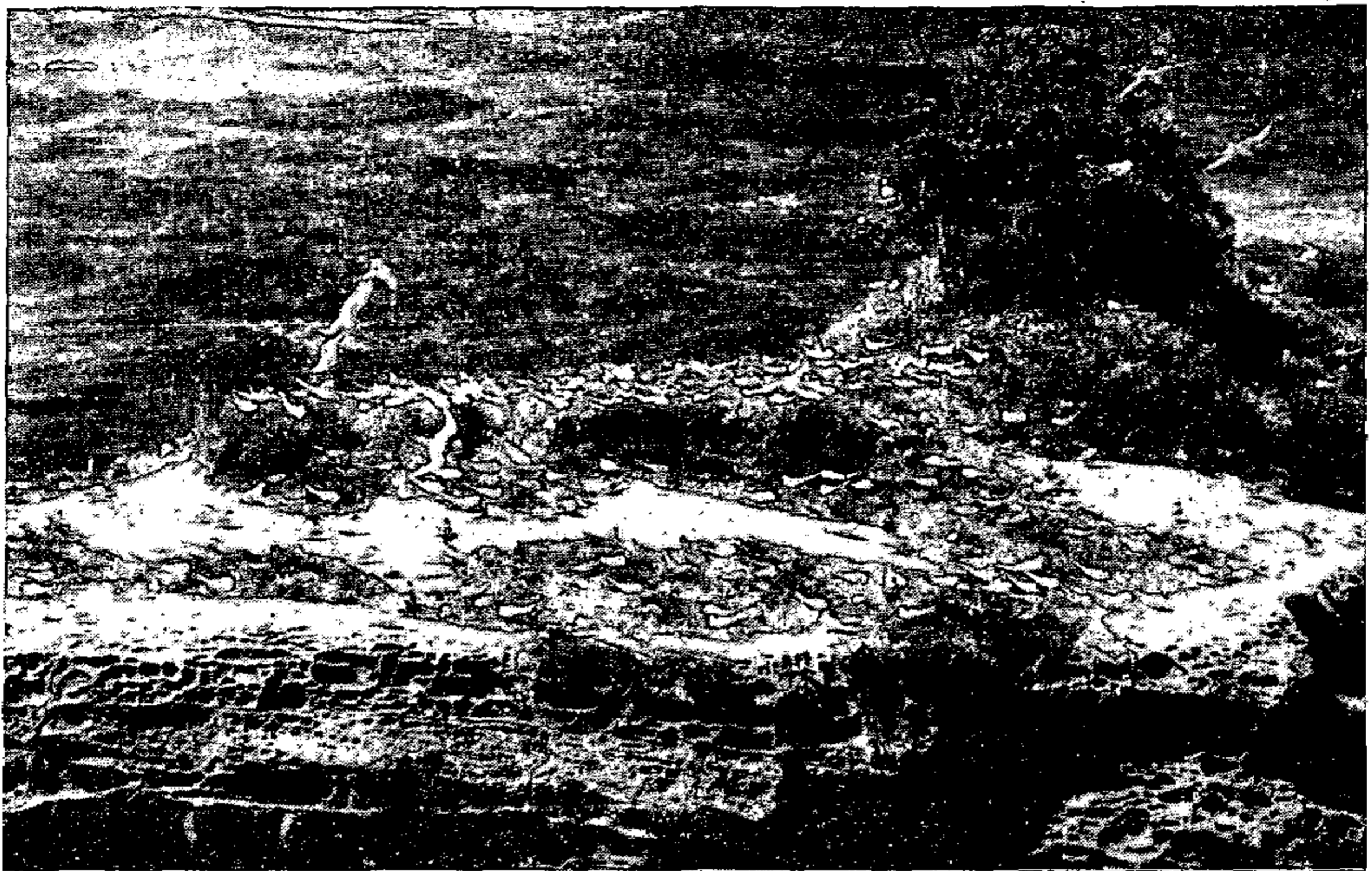


FIGURE 3 — White-fronted Terns breeding in the 1960s.

Photo: Olaf Petersen



FIGURE 4 — Gannets beginning to take over but not nesting in 1973.

Photo: Olaf Petersen

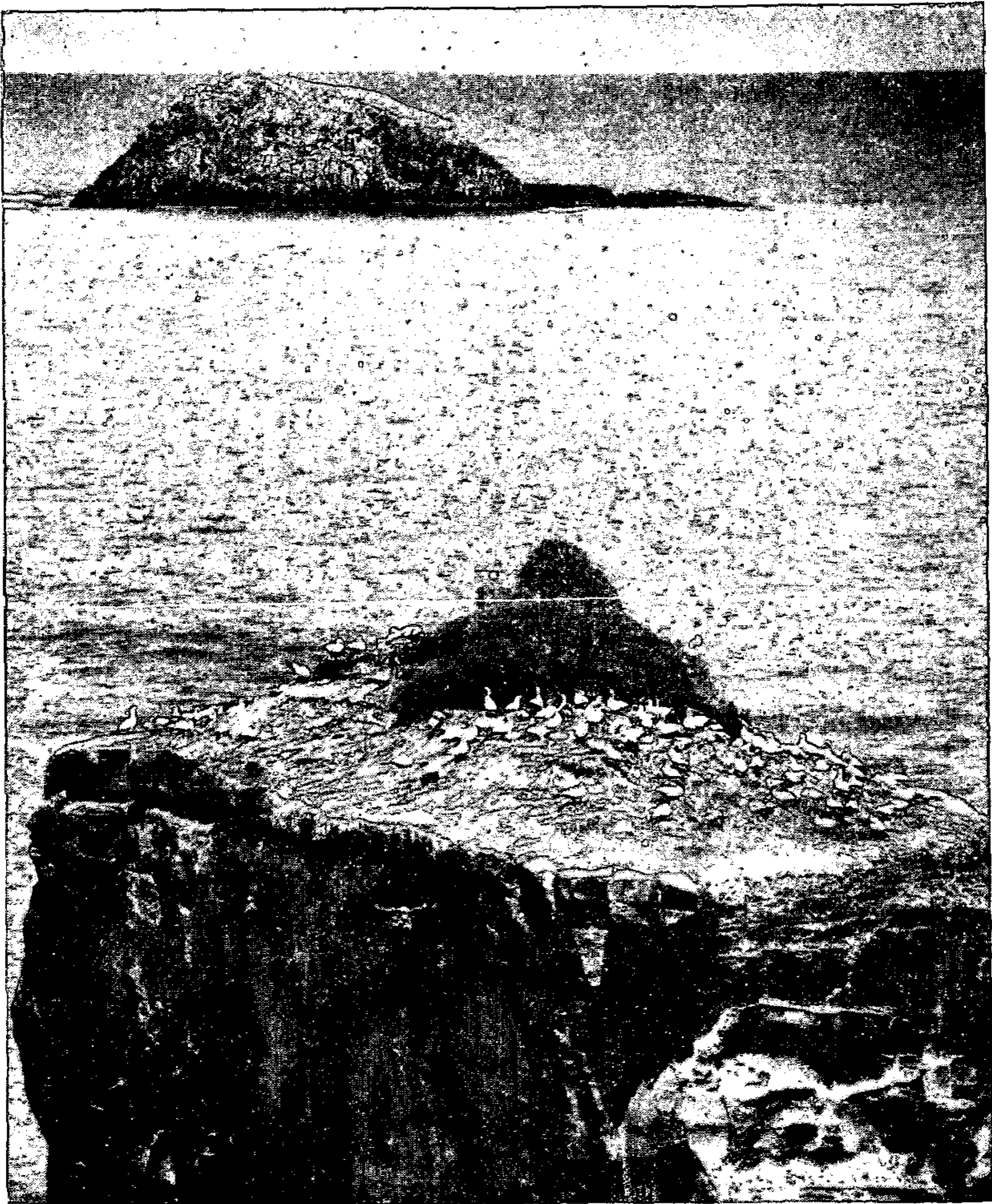


FIGURE 5 — Gannets nesting 1975-76. First season on the rock. Oaia Island in the distance. Photo: Olaf Petersen

and making nest-building movements, and a little sparring going on. The colony on 27 November is shown in Figure 6. 93 chicks were present on 23 January 1978. Most on the upper platform were in juvenile plumage and exercising their wings. Many chicks in white down were in nests on the outer slopes, while small chicks and unoccupied birds were on outermost edges (B. D. Heather, pers. comm.). On 12 March 1978, 60 chicks, including 4 still in down, were seen, together with 51 adults. On 9 April only 12 mottled juveniles remained but approximately 150 adults were present.

There were 55 birds on 8 August 1978, with some ceremonial displays in progress; no nests had yet been built. On 20 September, there were 156 birds and 80 nests (no eggs); also 27 White-fronted Terns on ledges on the south side of the rock.

Since its beginning, the colony has increased rapidly until all available space on the top of the rock has been occupied. The accompanying photographs show how the vegetation has been modified. The sides are too sheer to accommodate gannets. During the season, birds often alight on two adjacent platforms on the mainland, but have not so far attempted to nest there.

The rock is conveniently situated for viewing from the mainland, no disturbance occurs and, although the base can be reached at low water, the height and steepness deter all but the expert climber.

It is hoped that this gannetry will continue to thrive. It is both an object of study for local ornithologists and an attraction for the interested public.

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SYLVIA REED, 4 Mamaku Street, Meadowbank, Auckland 5



FIGURE 6 — The colony on 27 November 1977.

Photo: Olaf Petersen