

SHORT NOTE

An unusual last meal for a fairy prion (titi wainui, *Pachyptila turtur*)

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On the 28 February 2023 a dead fairy prion (titi wainui, *Pachyptila turtur*) was found washed up on Saint Clair beach, Ōtepoti Dunedin (45.909580°S, 170.502050°E). The bird appeared to have been dead for at least one week and was placed in a covered sand box to continue its decay. When inspected six months later the abdominal cavity was found to contain the elytra of 22 eucalyptus tortoise beetles (*Paropsis charybdis* Stål, 1860).

These chrysomelid beetles are approximately 10 mm long, hemispherical, and a mottled tan/brown/pink colour. They were accidentally introduced to New Zealand in the 1920's, becoming widespread over 50 years ago. As a herbivorous pest of *Eucalyptus* gum trees it has been the focus of biocontrol research (White 1973; Radics *et al.* 2018). The adult beetles are strong and widespread fliers in late summer (McGregor 1989; Selman 1994) and many were observed in late February 2023 at the Hump Ridge, Southland (R. Goldsmith *pers. comm.*).

Flying beetles could be blown offshore or swept down rivers and may concentrate along convergent zones of coastal currents. Previously a large number were found washed up on Bay of Plenty (North Island, New Zealand) beaches (White 1973).

Gum trees in coastal Otago are relatively common with over 12,000 hectares of plantation *Eucalyptus* in Otago/Southland in 2014 (SWC 2015). Fairy prions are also relatively common in coastal Otago and breed on the Otago coast including at Saint Clair and Green Island.

Fairy prions usually feed on euphausiids, amphipods, cephalopods, fish, and molluscs but will readily feed on anything resembling food on the water surface (Harper & Fowler 1987), particularly if the bird is starved or a juvenile (Harper & Fowler 1987; Acampora *et al.* 2014). The bird in this observation was a fledgling as indicated by the incomplete fusion of some of the bones (N. Rawlence *pers. comm.*). Terrestrial insects have occasionally been reported in seabird stomach contents (Steele & Klages 1986; Gartshore *et al.* 1988; Petry *et al.* 2008; Acampora *et al.* 2014) but may be considered an irregular and unimportant dietary

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component (Gartshore *et al.* 1988) and therefore omitted from dietary study results.

Although low numbers of the eucalyptus tortoise beetles have been recorded in the stomachs of rooks (*Corvus frugilegus*) (Porter 1979), common starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) (Moeed 1980), house sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) and European greenfinches (*Chloris chloris*) (MacMillan 1981), the beetle larvae and adults are considered to be poisonous or at least unpalatable (Moore 1967; Selman 1994). It is not known if eating 22 *Paropsis charybdis* beetles caused the death of this prion.

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