

SPINE-TAILED SWIFTS AT HAAST

By A. WRIGHT and H. R. McKENZIE

It is not unusual for stray rare birds to be reported from the south-west coast of the South Island. At the new Haast Bridge, in the early evening of 16/11/65 a party of six Spine-tailed Swifts (*Chaetura caudacuta*) was observed hawking in wide sweeps but keeping in a loose flock. From 1730 hours to later than 1830 hours, first at the southern approach to the bridge and latterly a few hundred yards along the road towards Haast township, they worked consistently in light rain and still air. Attention was drawn to the first bird seen because of its large size, the swinging soaring flight, the swept back wings, the stumpy fore-end, the generally dark colour, and, next, the short square-ended tail. Five other birds quickly appeared. Owing to the dim background of rain and cloud it was hard to discern colour features until the swifts flew in front of large dark trees which stood in groups not far away. This they did only one at a time, so that we could not determine the amount of white on each bird. It seemed that one or perhaps two had the full amount of white while the others were thought to be darker, perhaps immature birds. All had the short square ended tail and other features of the first bird seen. When one would fly low over the car at a few feet, no further details could be observed because of its great speed. It was agreed that the most coloured bird or birds had light on front of neck and upper breast and had broad stripes from below the "shoulder" along the sides below the outstretched wings and converging to somewhere about the vent. The lower back and upper rump showed light but this was not definite. On the way back to A. Wright's Wildlife lodge up the Haast River A.W. called on a deer-meat hunter, T. F. Trevor, who had a good knowledge of the Australian back country and asked him to describe a Spine-tailed Swift. This he did without hesitation, confirming what we had seen, calling the light bands along the sides speckled, which was later found to be more correct and calling the back speckled which was not quite right as it is more a smooth off-white. He described the feeding habit, saying that it was mostly seen at evening.

Later study by H.R.McK. of mounted birds in the Canterbury Museum and Auckland War Memorial Museum further confirmed the identification. The only other swift of similar size and general colouration is the Eastern and Australian Fork-tailed Swift (*Apus pacificus*). The birds seen definitely did not have forked tails.



REVIEWS

More New Zealand Bird Portraits by M. F. Soper, A.R.P.S., Whitcombe & Tombs Ltd., 32/6.

Dr. Soper's studies and photographs of New Zealand birds, made after long hours in the field and the hide, are now so well known that they need no recommendation. This book is in every way a worthy sequel to the first, upon which it was your reviewer's happy task to comment in *Notornis* X, 307-308.



IM. F. Soper

V — Southern Crested Grebe on Lake Fergus.

In his earlier volume the author was concerned mainly with some inland species of Otago and Southland. In its successor his interest is primarily with some of the spectacular birds of the South Island coast from Otago and Fiordland to the islands of Cook Strait. Portraits of Penguins, Albatrosses, Petrels, Shearwaters and Shags pass before the eyes of the reader in an extended avian beauty parade. At the same time Dr. Soper fills some gaps among the inland birds with notable studies of Great Crested Grebe, Falcon, Blue Duck and Kea.

Dr. Soper's observations on behaviour are always acute and often original and his text is pleasantly evocative. For example his critical ear detected three distinct seasonal songs for the Bellbirds of Queens-town. Here surely is a challenge to North Island students of bird-song,



[M. F. Soper

VI — Southern Crested Grebe. The bird has just returned to the nest and is uncovering the egg.

who are lucky enough to pass their days in 'Bellbird country.' Thoughtful remarks in the chapter on the Kea are an important contribution to the literature of this contentious subject.

In a short introduction, the author reveals some of his technical secrets. Modestly he claims that his book is "a miscellany and complete life histories are beyond its scope." Let us hope that another miscellany is on the way; and that a handsome clutch of two will receive an addition, marked with equal richness. Author and publisher have co-operated to produce a beautiful book; further proof, if need be, of New Zealand's growing maturity in yet another field of civilised endeavour.

— R.B.S.

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Birds of the Atlantic Islands, Vol. II, D. A. Bannerman, Oliver & Boyd, 84/-.

This massive volume is restricted to the Madeiran islands. It is in the accepted Bannerman tradition. The author's personal experience of Madeira goes back for more than half a century; and he is nothing if not thorough in the study of possible sources of information, as is shown by the long bibliography. Most ornithologists who have visited the Madeiran archipelago in recent years have apprised him of their findings. The result is an authoritative volume, excellently illustrated, which will not be superseded for a very long time.