

Plumage is not always a reliable indicator of age. When birds were captured on Kundy Island it was noticed that fledgling Saddlebacks ('jackbirds') were often similar in appearance to yearling birds. The two groups were distinguished on Breaksea by whether they were banded or not. Any yearling bird on Breaksea was a released bird and therefore banded, and any fledgling bird had hatched on the island and was thus unbanded. There were fledglings which might have been taken to be yearlings except for the fact they were unbanded.

As with all conservation programmes, a large number of people have contributed in important ways. Access to the Titi (Muttonbird) islands on which South Island Saddlebacks are found was granted by the Rakiura Titi Committee. Breaksea Island was made rat-free through the efforts of people from the Department of Conservation, DSIR Ecology Division (now Landcare/Maanaki Whenua), Operation Raleigh and other volunteers. The transfer and monitoring of Saddlebacks were accomplished by DOC staff, representatives of the Rakiura Titi Committee, and volunteers.

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### **First Spotless Crake's nest for the South Island**

Spotless Crakes (*Porzana tabuensis*) are seldom reported from the South Island. A glance at the *Atlas of Bird Distribution in New Zealand* (Bull *et al.* 1985) reveals how few have been seen. Just 14 squares had Spotless Crakes, these being in the Marlborough region, North-west Nelson, some wetlands and lakes along the Southern Alps, Lakes Waihola and Waipori in Otago, and near the coast of Southland. Classified Summarised Notes since the Atlas was published have just two additional entries, but in previously known localities. In recent years Department of Conservation staff (pers. comm.) have occasionally come across them in their work. None, however, has been known from North Canterbury, nor are there historical records. There are no skins from that area in the Canterbury Museum (Amanda Freeman, pers. comm.). Even Stead (1927), writing about rails, mentions Pukeko, Weka, Marsh Crake and Banded Rail but not Spotless Crake.

On 24 October, after a report that Spotless Crakes may have been seen at St Anne's Lagoon (near Cheviot) some years earlier, I joined Andrew Crossland, who regularly surveys waterfowl there, and made a systematic survey, using tape recordings, of all likely crake habitat around the margins of the lagoon. There was only one response, the calls being clearly identified as those of a Spotless Crake, and a brief view of the bird confirmed it. Being spring it seemed a good opportunity to search for nests and, although the water was deep, I checked the immediate area and discovered two unoccupied nests. One was a flattish platform, the other a more tightly woven and more carefully concealed nest, which in my experience would be the one more likely to be laid in.

On 4 November, I checked the nests again and both were still empty. This time wearing waders, I was able to scramble to some additional likely sites and found a three-egg clutch in a similar, tightly woven and well-concealed nest under the crown of a niggerhead (*Carex secta*). It was 41 cm above the water and constructed entirely of strands of the sedge itself. The eggs measured 29.9 x 22.9, 31.8 x 23.0 and 30.0 x 23.4. I visited the nest again on 6 and 7 November and it still contained three eggs. A further two empty nests were found at this time. I was not able to check the nests again until 11 December, when all five were empty.

The territory and nest sites were in a 10-metre-wide strip of dense swamp vegetation between open water and the lake shore. This strip comprised tall (2 - 3 metre) raupo, carex and flax with a partial overstorey of willow and was bordered by rolling farmland. The water quickly deepened within a metre of the shore and was 1.2 - 1.5 m deep around the nest sites. Dense vegetation and willow overstorey seem as important for these crakes at St Anne's Lagoon as was the willow overstorey present near nests found at Waingarō, Waikato (Hadden 1970, 1972).

Birds were absent from otherwise apparently suitable habitats i.e. raupo and carex surrounded by water but with no willows. Many willows have recently been felled as the lagoon margins have been cleared and it was in one of these cleared areas that the possible sighting of the Spotless Crake was initially made. Could it be that willows are a critical factor in the habitat requirements of Spotless Crakes and that they may need some type of tree cover within their territory? This felling of willows is of some concern as Andrew Crossland has now noted a reduction in the numbers of Coot (*Fulica atra*) and an absence of Australasian Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus novaehollandiae*), formerly present and breeding.

I thank Andrew Crossland for making helpful comments on a first draft of this note.

#### LITERATURE CITED

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