

SHORT NOTE

AN HISTORICAL NOTE ON MIGRATORY SPECIES IN CENTRAL OTAGO

Recently published by the Maniototo Early Settlers' Association, Naseby, is a 1899-1904 diary of Charles J. Ayton, a pioneer rabbitier, prospector, peat-cutter, fencer, and general odd-job man who lived on the high tussock penepplain of inland Otago near the Serpentine, upper Taieri River, altitude 2000-3000'.

Ayton was a well-educated Englishman, an astute observer of all his surroundings, and a meticulous diarist.

The only two entries concerning migrant birdlife are

Sep. 4, 1902: "Whale Birds arrived."

Sep. 7, 1903: "Red Bills have arrived."

No further entries were found in an unpublished earlier diary (1897-99), a photocopy of which is held in the Hocken Library, Dunedin.

The first entry may refer to the Black-backed Gull (*Larus dominicanus*) or, more likely, the Black-billed Gull (*Larus bulleri*), which superficially more closely resembles the White-fronted Tern (*Sterna striata*), the last-named sometimes being known as 'whale-bird' (T. H. Potts, *Out in the Open* p. 216). The name 'whalebird' has also traditionally been used for various species of petrels and shearwaters and at least three species of prion but is not applicable here since none of those migrates into Central Otago.

The second entry almost certainly refers to the South Island Pied Oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus finschi*), which has a conspicuous long vermillion bill and is still colloquially called 'Redbill' today in some regions.

The interesting point about these records is that they indicate a spring migration about 3 to 5 weeks later than currently occurs. My observations for the years 1963-70 inclusive (unpublished data, Diploma in Wildlife Management, University of Otago, 1970) show the following dates for early arrivals:

Black-billed Gull: Last week of July

Black-backed Gull: Second week of August

Oystercatcher: Last week of July

The main reason for the present consistently earlier migration could be the much milder winters now being experienced; certainly, snowfalls are much less frequent and less severe than they were 80 or 90 years ago.

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