

ALBINISTIC WHITE-FACED HERONS

Although the amount of white on the face of the White-faced Heron (*Ardea novaehollandiae*) can be quite variable, especially on young birds, four birds have been seen in Northland with much more white than usual.

1. The bird shown in Fig. 1 had least white of all. This photograph is one of several fine colour pictures taken by P. Morrin of Raupunga, Hawkes Bay, over 10 days in early July 1979 at Sandspit, Warkworth, using an 800 mm lens from a canoe. The bird was adult, as is shown by the long back plumes and the long buffy feathers on the breast. It was seen only at low tide and usually kept to itself, even though other White-faced Herons were present.
2. Marion E. Wallis of Maungaturoto saw two White-faced Herons with "head and breast snowy white" roosting in mangroves and in flight among c.20 normal White-faced Herons in the Herekino district on 4 April 1981. Bill, legs, wings, and rest of plumage were normal.
3. The bird shown in Fig. 2 was photographed by P. Morrin at Morumoru, north of Wairoa, on 10 June 1982. It was first reported by K. Hawkins, NZ Wildlife Service, in early June, and it could not be found again in July.
4. A bird reported to A. T. Edgar in mid-January 1981 by Mrs Susan Evans of Scudders Bay, Kerikeri Inlet, was on the Scudders Bay property of Dr J. F. Comely until at least mid-June, apart from a 2-week absence in late April. The pattern of white on this bird caused some dispute as to whether or not it was a White-necked Heron (*A. pacifica*), which is only a rare vagrant to New Zealand. On 17 January, it was watched by a party that included ATE, BDH, and M. A. Kennedy. It seemed different from the other White-faced Herons nearby in several ways, which at least superficially suggested the field characters of White-necked Heron. The whole head and neck, including the long feathers of the lower neck, were white, except for several small pale-grey patches on the sides of the neck. Each wing had two white patches, one at the carpal bend and one (the larger) in mid-wing; the outlines of these patches were irregular, making the wing look patchy in flight. The bill was grey, black near the tip, facial skin grey, and iris, legs and feet were yellow. The rest of the plumage was like that of White-faced Herons.

This bird seemed larger, though not greatly so, than the other White-faced Herons it was near, in particular looking thicker and longer in neck and leg. When feeding on pasture, it held the head erect, often stretched at 45°, looking rather goose-like as it walked up a steep slope of pasture, taking earthworms after rapid but slight sideways movements of head and neck.

On 19 January, BDH and MAK studied the bird closely by 25x

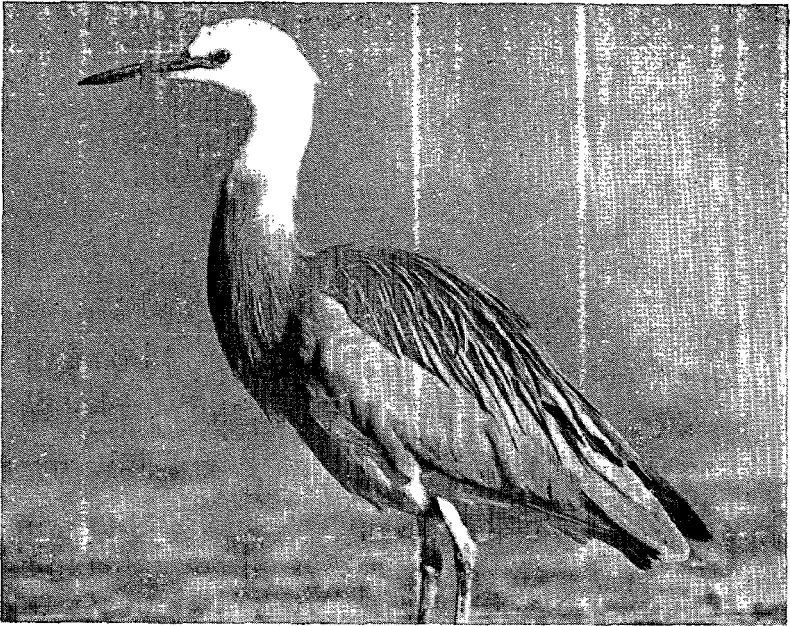


FIGURE 1 — White-faced Heron at Sandspit, Warkworth, July 1979.
Photo: P. Morrin

telescope as it sat and preened on a fence post near a normal White-faced Heron on another post. Apart from the white areas and the impression of slightly larger size, every detail of plumage was that of a White-faced Heron. Buff was lacking on the breast and the back plumes were not full length, and so the bird may not have been adult; it was in body moult because many white feathers were discarded during preening. Apart from the white areas, the grey patterns of upper wing, tail, and underparts were those of White-faced Herons. On several occasions, White-faced Herons were antagonistic to it.

Dr Comely noted that, although it fed in the same ways as the other herons, on the mudflats at low tide and the fields at higher tides, and roosted as they did at the tops of mangroves, it tended to keep to certain parts of both mudflats and fields and often roosted alone. It was usually accepted by the other herons but, when roused, often took wing first, possibly because its longer neck gave it better visibility. Its wing beats seemed to be slower and it tended to fly more and glide less than the other herons.

A distant but clear photograph of the bird taken by Dr Comely was shown to J. L. McKean of Darwin, who confirmed its identity as



FIGURE 2 — White-faced Heron near Wairoa, June 1982

Photo: P. Morrin

an albinistic White-faced. The White-necked is very much larger and heavier billed, quite apart from many differences of plumage, especially in young birds.

In January 1983, the same bird was seen again by BDH and MAK. It had become very much whiter, having wholly white head, neck, and mantle, and most of the wing surfaces were white. The bird had been seen quite regularly by Dr Comely since 1981 and is presumably still there.

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