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SHORT NOTE

MIGRATORY MOVEMENT OF SILVEREYES AT FAREWELL SPIT

While working in the 8-10 km part of Farewell Spit on 15 May 1980, we realised that the faint background sounds of Silvereyes (*Zosterops lateralis*) were coming not from the dune vegetation but from high overhead. During this and the next two days, whenever we were away from the sound of wind or surf on the Central Flats of the spit or on the farm at the base, we recorded a daytime passage of small flocks of Silvereyes.

From about 1100 on the 15th, when we first noticed that the calling was from overhead, calls were continuous until nearly 1200. Judging by sound, most flocks comprised 20-30 birds. They were seldom visible to the naked eye, and few were seen even with binoculars. Two flocks of c.30, two of c.60, and one large one of c.100 were seen, all tightly bunched, flying eastwards along the spit about 150-200 m above the ground. Only one flock of c.30 was seen in the dune lupins, the birds calling excitedly and taking off eastwards along the spit.

On the 16th, four small flocks were heard flying high over the base of the spit between 0600 and 0700. At 7 km on the spit, at least 18 flocks passed high overhead between 0815 and 1200, but we spent about an hour of this time within sound of the Ocean Beach surf, and we were travelling and not listening between 0700 and 0815. Flocks passed at intervals ranging 1-20 minutes apart, and four flocks sounded large. The audible passage diminished toward midday, and only occasional small flocks were heard thereafter. The only Silvereyes

seen on the dunes were groups of nine and six flying low at the 10 km mark.

On the 17th, more birds were seen in the dune lupins, several small flocks of 15-20 at 7 km, and one of 100+, which was disturbed from the lupins by a Harrier (*Circus approximans*) and flew eastward along the spit. At the lighthouse (22 km along the spit), no birds were heard overhead, and only a few were in the trees and lupins about the lighthouse settlement. At Mullet Creek, 15 flocks were heard on passage between 0815 and 0915, six of which sounded large. Thereafter, flocks were fewer but sounded large.

Birds were not gathering in the trees and scrub at the base of the spit in the evening or early morning, and no night-flying flocks were heard, although listening checks were made.

These observations, although inadequate to estimate numbers, show that a strong movement of Silvereyes occurred eastward along Farewell Spit from the south during 15-17 May and presumably before and after those dates. The main movement seemed to last throughout the morning, diminishing towards noon. After noon, flocks were fewer, though often quite large, and ceased about mid-afternoon. Most birds were flying very high in small tight flocks, almost beyond the range of hearing, and others may well have been higher still and beyond range. The line of the spit was being followed at least to Mullet Creek, but not to the tip. Presumably, the birds were heading to the North Island with a landfall somewhere between Mt Egmont (visible even from the ground in fine weather) and Manawatu because, if they followed the curve of the spit to its tip at the lighthouse, they would be directed back to the South Island, an absurd manoeuvre.

This is not the first account of mass movements of Silvereyes in New Zealand. Buller (1888, *History of the birds of New Zealand*, 2nd ed.), by his description of the appearance of Silvereyes in the North Island indicated that a regular migration from the South Island took place, for they appeared in six winters before they started nesting. Stead (1932, *Life histories of New Zealand birds*) noted that a considerable seasonal migration began about the middle of April, and for one month Silvereyes could be heard flying north over Christchurch at almost any hour of the night. Dawson (1961, *Notornis* 9: 200) reported an east-to-west movement at night high over Christchurch on 11-12 April 1961 of small flocks judged by sound to contain at least 20 birds. Grant (1970, *Notornis* 17: 322-323) reported a West Coast passage past Greymouth of up to 2000 birds per hour, mainly in the morning and late afternoon in early June 1970. The flocks, which ranged from 10 to 100, travelled close to the ground, settling in bush and scrub for the night.

If, as at Farewell Spit, flocks travel high, they will not be noticed easily, except in unusually quiet conditions, and so what may well be an annual event in the April-June period can easily pass unnoticed. No reports exist for a similar return movement.

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