

## JUVENILE ROYAL SPOONBILLS AT THE MANAWATU ESTUARY

The Manawatu Estuary is recognised as the main wintering grounds of the Royal Spoonbill (*Platalea regia*) in New Zealand. From 1943 when Stidolph (1948) recorded four birds, the number of Royal Spoonbills overwintering increased slowly until a peak of 42 was reached in 1963 (Andrew 1972). This coincided with the establishment and growth of a breeding colony near Okarito. After 1963, the numbers at the Manawatu Estuary stabilised at 30-35, but increasing numbers of Spoonbills overwintered on estuaries elsewhere in New Zealand. Although many Royal Spoonbills continue to return to Okarito each spring, for some unknown reason they have not bred successfully there since the 1971-72 season. This has coincided with a decrease in the numbers overwintering at the Manawatu Estuary. By 1979 no more than 23 were seen in successive monthly censuses by members of the Manawatu branch of the Ornithological Society.

On 9 September 1979 the number had dropped to eight. During the count these birds moved from their normal roost on the south side of the estuary to the Foxton Beach spit where they settled 40 m away from us, near a flock of waders. From this range, with a 25x telescope, details of plumage and facial markings were very clear.

Six of the birds had a yellow "eyebrow" above and behind the eye, which contrasted with the black forehead, ocular region and wrinkled spatulate bill. Five of these birds had long drooping crests and of these, three had a buff wash on the foreneck. Falla *et al.* (1979) noted that the crests and a sandy-buff foreneck are characteristic of breeding birds, and Oliver (1955) noted that adults have a yellow spot above each eye.

The remaining two birds had a dark grey "eyebrow" rather than yellow, lacked crests and buff wash, and the spatulate bill was smooth and of a paler steel-blue colour. We saw the birds only briefly in flight as they landed and did not note the brown on the primaries which Falla *et al.* (1979) referred to as being present on young birds. However, we believe that these two birds were juvenile because, although we can find no reference to juvenile Royal Spoonbills having a smooth bill, Witherby *et al.* (1941) noted that juveniles of *Platalea leucorodia* have no corrugations on the bill, whereas the adults do. This is illustrated (Plate 50) but not described in the text in Cramp & Simmons (1977).

On 16 March 1980 HAR closely studied a flock of 21 Royal Spoonbills at the Manawatu Estuary. Three juveniles were present: these birds lacked the yellow "eyebrow," had smooth bills and had dark-tipped outer primaries. By this stage the adults had lost their nuptial crests and sandy-buff wash on the foreneck.

The recent occurrence of a Yellow-billed Spoonbill (*Platalea flavipes*) and Intermediate Egrets (*Egretta intermedia*) in New Zealand (Billing 1977, Seddon & Seddon 1979) and the regular movement of Little Egrets (*E. garzetta*) and Cattle Egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*) to and from Australia suggest that these juvenile Royal Spoonbills could have come from Australia. However, as a small colony of Royal Spoonbills was discovered in November 1979 at Vernon Lagoons, Marlborough, and had reputedly bred also the previous year (R. N. Holdaway, pers. comm.), it is also possible that both groups of juvenile Royal Spoonbills seen at the Manawatu Estuary were raised in New Zealand.

#### LITERATURE CITED

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#### BLACK-WINGED PETRELS ON PORTLAND ISLAND

Portland Island, 137 ha, at 39° 18'S 177° 52'E, is situated off the tip of Mahia Peninsula at the north-east of Hawkes Bay. It comprises 14 ha of lighthouse reserve and 123 ha of grassland on which sheep are run. There are mice on the island but no rats or cats. No petrels have previously been reported breeding there.

Since before Christmas, an occasional high-pitched call from a bird on the wing has been heard after dark. A search in the evening of January 11 revealed three Black-winged Petrels (*Pterodroma nigripennis*) in a grassy gully 500 metres north of the lighthouse reserve. One was captured and photographed, and the identification was confirmed by Mr Imber of the Wildlife Service, Wellington.

Calls were heard more frequently during February; a few incoming birds were seen at dusk and one at 0920 on the 12th, but no nest burrows could be found in the capture or any other area until February 16 when nine (and as many 'blind' burrows) were discovered in spinifex-covered sand about 50 metres above high water line 2 km north of the station.