

THE PRIONS COLLECTED BY R. H. BECK OFF THE ANTIPODES ISLANDS AND THE BREEDING SEASON OF THE LITTLE SHEARWATER

In their recent interesting account of the birds of the Antipodes Islands Warham & Bell (1979) remark that the Whitney South Sea Expedition collected four prions nearby on 15 February 1926. Dr Warham informs me that they obtained the information from R. H. Beck's diary, and during my last visit to New York I searched the collection in the American Museum of Natural History for the specimens. They shed interesting light on the reliability of data as well as the avifauna of the Antipodes Islands.

While I failed to locate any birds with that date, I eventually found four specimens which could be the birds in question (Table 1), although like the Little Shearwaters (*Puffinus assimilis*) taken at the same time, the location is given as 49°S 179°W as reported by Murphy (1927), whereas the Antipodes Islands which were supposedly in sight at the time are usually thought to lie in 179°E. This is not the only time labelling problems have occurred with longitude in this collection, as they also occur with the Flesh-footed, Buller's and Hutton's Shearwaters (*Puffinus carneipes*, *P. bulleri* and *P. huttoni*) at the Chatham Islands (Bourne 1967). Similar problems arise with the date.

The serial numbers of the Little Shearwaters said to have been collected at the same place on 16 February are 211019 and 211648-52. I conclude that all these birds were probably part of a mixed bag collected in the vicinity of the Antipodes Islands which were labelled erratically under the pressure of processing them in cramped conditions at sea, and as with a great many other older specimens from the subantarctic islands of New Zealand, it is necessary to exercise caution over the dates and localities. Bearing this in mind, it still seems likely that the birds that Beck shot before breakfast off Antipodes Island on 16 February 1926 (Warham & Johns 1979) included the first Antarctic Prion (*Pachyptila desolata*) for the area. I find the wing and tail a little short and the culmen and tarsus rather long compared to other populations (see also Despin *et al.* 1972), but there is also much room for scepticism over races of prions.

Since Warham & Bell assume that Little Shearwaters must

TABLE 1 — Prions said to have been collected at 49°S 179°W by the Whitney South Sea Expedition. (Measurements in mm.)

Serial No.	Date	Identity	Sex	Wing	Tail	Culmen		Tarsus	Toe
						Length	width		
211790	1 Feb. 1926	<i>P. turtur</i>	f.	181	90	20	10	33	37
334605	"	"	m.	179	88	21.5	10.5	32	38
334606	"	"	f.	171	85	20	10	30	37
334610	16 Feb. 1926	<i>P. desolata</i>	f.	186	84	28	13	34	36

breed in the winter in the Antipodes Islands, as they do further north, it may also be worth pointing out that M. J. Imber has recently found eggs in November on Gough Island. Few of the specimens from the subantarctic islands of New Zealand shed much light on the breeding dates there, except that nearly all the specimens from the Chatham Islands appear to be fledging juveniles with incompletely grown flight-feathers, and the two in the Canterbury Museum that have dates were collected by Hawkins on South East Island in May 1892 and on 13 October 1893. This suggests a prolonged breeding-season with at least some birds nesting in the summer there.

LITERATURE CITED

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COMMUNAL ROOSTING IN THE FANTAIL

In September 1978 Mr I. C. Duxbury, a farmer from Pigeon Bay, Banks Peninsula, described to me some observations he made there on the winter roosting behaviour of South Island Fantails (*Rhipidura fuliginosa fuliginosa*).

On cold 1970 winter evenings he observed Fantails entering the northern doorway of a shed. Because of the scarcity of shelter on his property he assumed that the birds were seeking shelter. One blustery night he found at least seven Fantails huddled together inside a 125 mm diameter loop of 14-gauge wire. The loop was strung from a roof support about 2 m above the floor. The postures of the Fantails were consistent with those adopted by birds exposed to the cold: withdrawn heads, fluffed-out plumage, and crouched low so that the legs were concealed by the under-body feathers.

The huddling together of the Fantails would further reduce heat loss, a function which has been ascribed to this behaviour in other species (see Landsborough Thomson, 1964, *A New Dictionary of Birds*, p. 710).

The configuration of the loop provided limited horizontal roosting space. Most Fantails, therefore, were forced to spread themselves up the sides of the loop, and so their distribution on the wire resembled a "U".

One possible advantage of this communal pattern of roosting is the support the uppermost birds would get from those beneath. Fantails perched on the sides of the loop, in particular, therefore, would need less energy to maintain their grip than if they had roosted alone