

## WHITE-FACED HERONS ON THE CHATHAM ISLANDS

The White-faced Heron (*Ardea novaehollandiae*) was first recorded at the Chatham Islands by Travers (1882, *Trans. N.Z. Inst.* 15: 187); but, according to B. D. Bell, it has been established only since 1966 (Carroll 1970, *Notornis* 17: 23).

In a survey of Te Whanga Lagoon by members of the Chatham Island Taiko Expedition on 16 January 1978, 69 White-faced Herons were recorded. This was considered to be a low count as roughly one-third of the lagoon shore was not searched, a stretch where birds were seen on other dates. Most of the birds were found on the rocky or shelly parts of the lagoon shore, rather than on the extensive mudflats in the north-eastern region. A further 65 White-faced Herons were recorded from many rocky coastline localities during January 1978. Flocks of up to 20 birds, but normally small parties of two to five, inhabited rock platforms, particularly around the northern coast and near Owenga. A few birds were normally found on the shores of the small coastal lakes in Petre Bay, e.g. one at Lake Huro and two at Lake Marakapia. None was seen on marshy pasture or inland creeks, both habitats commonly used by the White-faced Heron in New Zealand. This pattern of distribution was again noted during a visit in November-December 1978.

Although the White-faced Heron has colonised the island only recently, it seems that several factors may restrict its distribution on the island. Most of the small lakes and water-courses are peat-stained, making heron prey difficult to see, and the high mineral content in the water may limit the fauna. The absence of some potential prey species, such as frogs, from the Chatham Islands may have limited the spread into inland areas. Also, most of the mudflat area of Te Whanga Lagoon is fouled by excrement produced by thousands of Black Swans (*Cygnus atratus*).

The finding of a White-faced Heron nest in a rocky cleft in January 1978 (Gordon 1979, *Notornis* 26: 46) and the common occurrence of this species on rocky shorelines seem to indicate that the White-faced Heron is exploiting a niche more typical of the Reef Heron (*Egretta sacra*) in mainland New Zealand. Edgar (1978, *Notornis* 25: 57), when discussing the decline of the Reef Heron in New Zealand, stated "There is no competition for nest sites — the Reef Heron is a crevice-nester, the White-faced Heron a tree-nester." Reef Herons have been recorded as rare stragglers to the Chatham Islands, and apparently none has been seen recently (Edgar 1978, p. 56).

It is not clear whether the White-faced Herons on the Chatham Islands are in fact exploiting their preferred habitat in the absence of competition from Reef Herons or have been forced into coastal areas because of limiting factors inland.

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