

STARLINGS BATHING IN FLOCKS

On 12 March 1978 I spent an hour during mid-afternoon at a small dune lake near Foxton in the Manawatu. The lake is surrounded by farmland. At one end an area of mud merged into marshy pasture on one side and into shallow water on the other. A fence crossed the mud about three metres from the water's edge.

Small flocks of Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) were bathing in the water near the fence. Flocks of several hundred birds flew in from the north, splitting into smaller groups as they landed on the fence, the mud, on pasture by the fence or directly in the shallow water.

The birds in the water bathed in the normal manner, keeping very close together (almost touching each other) and all facing the same way. A continuous chattering was made by the bathing birds. At times two or three flocks of thirty or more birds each were bathing at once, with a few birds spread out between. Birds kept flying from the back to the front of the flock and to and from the shore and fence. These short flights were the same as in a feeding flock on pasture, passing over the flock to land in front of the leading birds or else away from the flock in a rapid, banking flight. Eventually the water became too deep and the flock stopped moving forward.

As well as the individual movements, whole flocks would suddenly move from fence to water or vice versa. Occasionally, birds from fence, shore and water flew away from the lake in one large flock. Flocks arrived from one direction and left in another, perhaps towards a roost.

The interesting feature of these observations is the similar behaviour of Starling flocks when feeding and when bathing. Powell (1974, Anim. Behav. 22 (2): 501-505) found that individual Starlings spent less time watching for predators and responded more quickly to the appearance of a model hawk when in a group of ten than when in smaller groups. Flocking in birds has several possible functions. It is not known how frequently Starlings bathe in flocks or how valuable this behaviour is to each bird.

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PRE-MIGRATION DISPLAY BY MONGOLIAN DOTTEREL
TO BANDED DOTTERELS

On 22 April 1978 J. A. Brown and I were at Karaka Shellbanks, south Manukau Harbour, when rapid *pit-pit* calls of Banded Dotterels (*Charadrius bicinctus*) drew our attention to a cluster of about 20 birds. A Mongolian Dotterel (*Charadrius mongolus*), which had spent the southern winter in the Karaka vicinity, was displaying to about 15 Banded Dotterels. Mongolian and Banded Dotterels, which breed in Asia and New Zealand respectively, are very alike in size and

appearance in non-breeding plumage. Interested spectators included a Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*), two very grey stints which we suspect may have been Semi-palmated Sandpipers (*Calidris pusilla*) and, for a short time, a New Zealand Dotterel (*Charadrius obscurus*).

The Mongolian Dotterel, drawing itself up to full height, ran to the Banded Dotterels and, standing with upstretched neck before them, trilled a soft *tirrit-tirrit-tirrit* and once or twice *tirr-ir-it*, whereupon all flew up to circle, perhaps three times, calling repeatedly. They alighted and the same display was repeated twice more. Since they seemed oblivious to our presence, we tried carefully to get the sun behind us, better to observe this unique interaction between these two dotterels. The attempt failed, for all flew right away.

The Mongolian Dotterel had a rich reddish-brown half collar. Chin, throat, breast and belly were white, as were forehead and superciliary. Upper surfaces were brownish grey. We were not able to note further details but my impression was that there was less white and more definite brown on the head than had been seen on previous occasions. On 13 November 1977, when the bird was first seen, the upperparts had been noted as light brownish grey and hind-neck rufous. Much white showed on face and forehead, viewed from the front. There had been a complete, narrow grey band across the upper breast, a dark patch behind the eye and the bill was short and thick. Legs were greyish.

A return next day with sound-recording equipment was fruitless. The bird could not be found, nor was it seen again.

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ANTARCTIC PETRELS AROUND FOVEAUX STRAIT

In normal years Antarctic Petrels (*Thalassoica antarctica*) are rarely seen, but towards the end of winter 1978 there were unusual numbers from Preservation Inlet to Stewart Island.

Roy Milford, who fishes these waters, passed on these comments to me. "Three or four have been round every fishing boat; and altogether there must have been some hundreds. It is nice to have a new bird around. They are very tame, the tamest seabird of all. In fact, you can reach down and pick them off the water. They seem completely fearless. Near the boats they sit alongside the Cape Pigeons (*Daption capense*), eating scraps, and the Cape Pigeons bully them. The Antarctic Petrels appeared in such numbers at the beginning of September. Coinciding with their arrival was an unusual abundance of octopus."

Roy Milford, with 70 pots, added that normally he would get three or four octopus per daily round, but that in 1978 he was getting 20 per day, and other crayfishermen were reporting similar numbers.

Any connection?

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