N.Z. BIRD NOTES

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Edited by Professor B. J. MARPLES and Dr. R. A. FALLA.
Address communications to Professor Marples, The Museum, Dunedin.
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CONTENTS.

REVIEWS.

" EMU," Vol. XLIV, part 4, April, 1945.

The last quarterly number is again deserving of notice for a number of articles of particular interest to New Zealand students.

K. A. Hindwood, in " The Fleshy-footed Shearwater *(Puffinus carneipes),"* describes late summer observation of small flocks off the coast of New South Wales and discusses the possibility that the birds may belong to the nearest breeding population at Lord Howe Island, 450 miles distant, the alternative being that they are non-breeders.

B. J. Marples, in " *Zosterops lateralis* at Dunedin, New Zealand," deals with the weight, size, colour, etc., of white-eyes trapped and ringed since 1938, a total of 1407 birds. This paper is not only model of method in examining trapped birds and in recording results, but extends our knowledge of the species in several directions that have not already been covered by Fleming's (" Emu," 1943) life history study and the movement and migration records made by members of this Society (1944), which were also based on trapping methods.

Results of weight studies are presented in tables and by graphs, and comparison made with the wider works of Baldwin and Kendeigh (1938) on North American Birds show close similarity in that maximum mean weight is reached in mid-winter, there is regular diurnal fluctuation and some indication of inverse correlation with the mean daily temperature. It is shown that white-eyes moult twice a year, that males appear on the average to be slightly larger than females, but that there is no sexual variation in winter plumage. A very interesting section deals with the colour variation in plumages, and three variants are distinguished. This gives a useful basis for future work, and when an equivalent study of the summer plumages of the white-eye can be undertaken the species will have been the most completely studied of New Zealand land-birds.

R. H. D. Stidolph, in " Breeding of Grey Teal in New Zealand," fills an erstwhile regrettable, almost disgraceful, gap in our knowledge of the elementary life histories of New Zealand ducks. The paper

gives a good description of nest, eggs and some of the habits of the Grey Teal in the Wairarapa district.

L. E. Richdale contributes "Courtship and Allied Behaviour in Penguins," a study in which he departs from the presentation of life history data to give an analysis of behaviour, based mainly on his valuable and intensive study over eight seasons of the Yellow-eyed Penguin, although other species are also discussed. There is a useful preliminary definition of terms which should do much to correct the loose usage so often employed in discussions on behaviour. Another welcome feature is a classification of all the fixed trains of action which the author has observed, illustrated in each case with his excellent photographs.

Mr Richdale finds comparison with the work of others who have ventured to write of penguin behaviour to be "difficult" for reasons which he gives. The inference is gratuitous: his own good work can very well be left to speak for itself.

J. A. Tubb's "Field Notes on Some New Guinea Birds" and G. R. Gannon's "Nesting Activities of the Grey Thrush" are papers of general interest, and there are also "The Grey Plover," by A. R. McGill; "The Eyrean Grass-Wren," by K. A. Hindwood; "The Genus Phoebetria in Australian Seas," by D. L. Serventy, and several other short papers.

R. A. F.

"CAMERA STUDIES OF NEW ZEALAND BIRDS, SERIES A."

By L. E. Richdale, Dunedin, 1944.

In No. 4 of the series, "Wild Life in New Zealand," Mr Richdale presents camera studies of seven species of penguin and eight petrels from the Otago-Stewart Island area. The high standard of photographic achievement we have learned to expect from this painstaking investigator is fully maintained, and the portraits of adults and young and moulting birds should prove of practical value as aids to identification in these "difficult" groups. Also, visitors to island colonies will find the illustrations of downy petrel chicks of known age a great help in assessing the age in days of young birds they encounter. There are 21 photographs of 15 species: The Erect-crested, Rock-hopper, Royal, White-flippered, Little Blue Penguins, and of *Eudyptes pachyrhynchus* (for which no suitable common name is available), and, in addition, of the Royal Albatross, Whitefaced Storm Petrel, two Prions, Diving Petrel, Cape Pigeon, Nelly and Mutton-bird. Informative sub-titles and an author's preface accompany the plates.

Vernacular names for our lesser known seabirds remain a problem and call for standardisation. It may be doubted whether "Erect crested Penguin" will ever gain the currency of such a rival term as "Schlater's Penguin," and the use of "Fairy Prion" for *Pachyptila turtur* is preferable to "Narrow-billed Prion," a name suitably applied to *P. belcheri*.

Mr Richdale promises a full account of the life history of the Muttonbird as the next number in the series.

The booklet is obtainable from the author, 23 Skibo Street, Dunedin. Price, 3s 6d.

C. A. F.

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON SOUTH ISLAND PIED OYSTER-CATCHERS IN AUCKLAND.

By R. B. Sibson.

Of the three New Zealand mainland forms of Hæmatopus, perhaps the least problematical now since the publication of Dr Falla's paper (Rec. Cant. Mus. Vol. IV No. 5 pp. 259-266) is the inland-breeding riverbed oystercatcher of the South Island *(H. ostralegues finschi)*. It is a bird of uniform coloration, and except for a very occasional freak, shows no noteworthy variation in the pied pattern of its plumage. It is slightly smaller and looks sprucer and less "humped up" than the variable oystercatchers of the North Island *(H. reischeki)* and its clear-cut pattern of black and white, with white inverted V running up the back, white rump, clean white underparts and conspicuous white wing-bar, is usually enough to separate it in the field from the most pied specimens of "reischeki." ' Another useful field character observable when the bird is standing, is the recess of white on the shoulder running up towards the base of the neck. In my experience *reischeki* seldom has this.

When nesting is over, the pied oystercatchers of the South Island move down to the coast, and although big flocks which may number thousands winter in certain southern localities, e.g., Waimakiriri estuary, many hundreds move northwards. For those that reach the province of Auckland the main wintering grounds are the extensive tidal flats of the harbours of Kaipara and Manukau, and of the Firth of Thames. Of Kaipara little is recorded. Major Buddle has noted about 200 in February and Mr P. Hanna knows them near Maungatoroto as winter visitors in some scores. Some may travel still further north. I believe that five uniformly-marked pied oystercatchers that I saw in May, 1940, at the north end of the Ninety Mile Beach were *finschi*. They were with some *reischeki,* but looked smaller and tidier and tended to keep apart as a group.

Dr Falla has shown that *finschi* is an early breeder. It is not surprising, therefore, that some are already moving north in December, and arrive near Auckland about the time of the New Year. Some early records are:—

Firth of Thames, January 1, 1941: Nine. As none had been noted on four visits during the previous three months, there is little doubt that these were recent arrivals. January 2, 1942: Four. A single immature bird had been seen in October some miles from the normal haunt of *finschi* on this coast. Manukau, January 14, 1944: About sixty, many of which, to judge by their dusky bill-tips, were young birds of that season.

There is no doubt that many *finschi* only a few months old arrive in the north in January. On January 2, 1945, I had an excellent view of an adult and a youngster side by side at Kaiaua, Firth of Thames; and a few days later I took careful note of an obvious juvenal in Manukau. The legs of these young birds are pale greyish pink, and for an inch or so a duskiness covers the tip of the beak.

If adults are available for comparison, it is easily seen that the young birds are browner; and at a distance of about twenty yards the buffy tips on the scapulars and upper wing coverts are discernible.

By February flocks of *finschi* are becoming large, and most birds are settled in their winter quarters by the end of April. In both the Firth of Thames and the Manukau a peak has been noted in April, from which it may be assumed that some birds are still moving further north. (So far I have no records of flocks being seen in Whangarei Harbour). My biggest counts are:—F.o.T. c. 135 Ap. 4, 1942; Manukau c. 260, Ap. 16, 1944, c. 450, Ap. 2, 1945.

An interesting fact that has emerged from observations made in the last few years is that, like the Wrybills, flocks of *finschi* summer on these northern flats. It may safely be assumed that *finschi* does not breed till nearly two years old, and that these summering birds are juvenals which have not felt any strong impulse to return south and occupy nesting territory. In Kaipara Mr P. Hanna has seen flocks of about 50 birds as late as mid-September,. In the Firth of Thames 24 were present on October 3, 1943; and seven on October 22, and again on November 5, 1944. In Manukau in 1942 the numbers actually increased during the spring months, viz., 25 on October 4, 26 on November 2, 36 on December 3 and 14. It may be that in these presumably juvenal birds the instinct to migrate at the end of winter is only weak and disappears after they have gone a short distance. This being so, juvenals that have wintered in Kaipara or further north may easily summer in Manukau or the Firth of Thames. Mr H. R. McKenzie now tells me that a single *finschi* spent the spring of 1944 on the Wairoa Estuary, Clevedon. A regular watch is kept on the estuary. It was first seen on October 29, and was still there on December 28.

There is little to say about the behaviour of *finschi* in the north. Day by day the flocks gather at the same shellbank roosts at high tide, and they may spend several hours on end resting on them. Food seems to be abundant and life can be leisurely. They associate amicably with Godwits; and quite often *finschi* individuals may be found in the large Godwit packs. It is noticeable, however, that both in Manukau and the Firth of Thames the localities where the flocks of *finschi* regularly occur are areas where there is a much thinner population of wintering Stilts. *Finschi* seem to prefer the firmer flats where sand, mud and shell are intermixed, whereas stilts are quite at home on soft flats of undiluted sticky mud. Food analyses of the stomach contents of the two species might be correlated with this tendency to occupy different types of feeding ground.

During their stay in the north they are generally sedate and reasonably approachable. Only twice have I noticed any spontaneous excitement. Once on January 14 trills were heard reminiscent of breeding; and again on April 6 for a short while, a few birds attempted something of the piping ceremony so often described by English writers, e.g., Huxley.

It is fitting to tell here the story of an albino which became a familiar figure to several observers in the Firth of Thames. It was

first seen by Mr H. R. McKenzie and myself on February 8, 1942, in a flock of *finschi,* and we had no doubt that it had recently arrived with them from the South Island. It was regularly seen throughout the winter, and when other *finschi* departed in early spring it remained behind and attached itself to a colony of stilts breeding on fresh water pools just behind the beach. While it was here I noted that it had a poor thin voice and, hard though it tried, it could not produce the ringing, piercing "tweep" of a full-blooded *finschi.* It was still present on January 2, 1943, but sometime after that it disappeared. It may have travelled farther north with other *finschi* that were passing through. However, on January 2, 1944, it was back again. We concluded it must be the same bird, for it behaved in the same way and haunted the same places. On May 21 it was obviously showing much more colour. We had always noted an underlying "gingerishness" on certain parts of its plumage, particularly on the upper back, and this was now darkening. On August 20, when last seen, it was a surprisingly different bird. From the head down to the lower chest it was a correct *finschi.* But though the fore edge of the wings was black, their near edge was white, as was also the tail. In flight it was a striking bird, all black in front, all white behind; except, of course, for beak and legs, of which the colour was now almost normal.

I have given these details because I know of no other instances when an albino has assumed almost normal plumage. When we last saw our bird it must have been at least nearly three years old; and if, as seems likely, it was a juvenal when it first reached the Firth of Thames, it seems that as it matured its proper pigments belatedly started to function.

The taxonomic status of *finschi* is still in doubt. As one who for many years was familiar with *Hæmatopus ostralegus* in Britain, perhaps I may state my reasons for believing that *finschi* must be considered a sub-species of *ostralegus.* In the field the two forms are very alike. Plumage differences are slight, perhaps the most obvious being that in winter British oystercatchers show a white patch on the throat. In voice and habits, too, here is general agreement. Both forms show a strong tendency to flock and migrate, but whereas some British oystercatchers nest inland, it appears that all *finschi* do so.

THE WHITE-FACED HERON.

By B. A. Ellis.

The white-faced heron (*Notophoyx novaehollandiae*) is not an uncommon bird in the lower Shag Valley. About the spring of 1941 a pair of herons was noticed in the vicinity, and they chose for their nesting site one of the many bluegums surrounding a homestead, and only a few hundred yards from a creek where food was obtained during nesting. Here they successfully reared a family of two, and so have

annually returned to this location to nest. It has been noticed that the young are permitted to remain until the next season, when they are driven off by the original pair.

Nesting begins in October, and for the last three years two young herons have been flying by early December. One young heron which broke its wing in leaving the nest was cared for at the homestead for some time, and would come at call for scraps of meat, of which it took large quantities. Eventually, however, it was drowned in a flood.

This season was the only one in which a second nest was built, apparently as the first was marauded, one downy young bird being found dead beneath the tree. I climbed to this second nest, with the disappointing knowledge that the two young had left only two or three days before (about 15th January). It was built about 60-70 feet up next to the trunk of a macrocarpa tree which stood among bluegums, and consisted entirely of dry bluegum twigs—mostly about a foot long and a little thinner than a lead pencil. It was about one foot six across, and nearly nine inches deep, and built rather like a pigeon's nest, only more cup-shaped. It is interesting to note that a sparrow's nest was placed in one corner, and it seemed that the two families had been present at the same time. For about two days the young herons flew to and from this nesting tree to another tree, apparently "getting their wings."

A few days later I watched, after a very careful approach, the herons feeding at a pond in the hills. The birds would wade knee-deep in the water with wary and measured step then swiftly lunge their beaks into the grasses and usually, though not always, lift up a kicking frog, which, after a peck or two, was devoured. It was amusing to watch the grotesque attitudes assumed when a harrier flew low over the swamp.

A BLACKBIRD NESTING STORY.

By H. R. McKenzie.

The nest was built on the bare window-sill behind a screen of climbing geranium mixed with a strong growth of *Muhlenbeckia australis,* heavily screened from without by the greenery, but with only the window sash and glass between it and the inside of the room. I could see the bird on the nest by raising my head a few inches from the pillow only five feet away. She did not become very tame, and great caution had to be used, especially in the earlier stages. I work away from home, so most of the observations are for morning and evening only. Details of times and dates were carefully kept, and the averages given are exact for the periods of observation.

The building of the nest was not pursued steadily..

26-27/9/42.—The hen bird visited the site each morning.

28/9/42.—7 a.m.: Noted a scanty ring of grass on the sill.

29/9/42.—The whole framework of the nest was erected, with some mud on the inside.

30/9/42.—The hen started work at 6.45 a.m., making trips every two to three minutes. She ceased at night when some fibre lining

was in place. The cock sang from 5.40 a.m., but did not help.

1-4/10/42.—Only a little lining added each day. She used her breast to press it into place.

4/10/42.—First seen at 5.10 p.m.

5/10/42.—The second egg was laid between 7 a.m. and 6.10 p.m.

6/10/42.—The third egg laid, and she stayed on the nest all night for the first time.

7-19/10/42.—During this incubation period she stayed on the nest for 14.5 minutes average (max. 45 minutes, min. 1 minute) and she left it to feed for intervals of 7.5 minutes average (max. 14 minutes, min. 2 minutes). Her periods on the nest were longer during the middle of the day. While sitting she changed her position every 3 to 10 minutes. I do not think she turned the eggs every time she changed position. To turn them she sometimes used her beak, but I could not see exactly what she did. I believe that practically all of the turning was done with her feet and body with a sidewise shuffling. Unfortunately it was later than this that I thought of rigging a mirror to enable me to see into the bottom of the nest.

During incubation she survived two serious trials. On the 8th at 9.30 p.m. she suddenly fluttered up the window-pane into the vines in a panic. I switched out the light and used a torch, but found nothing. She apparently settled on the nest again. A few minutes later she cried out and fluttered out through the vines. This time the torch revealed a cat. I tried to shoot him, but missed. He was a pest in other respects. The bird did not return that night. A bunch of her feathers lay by the nest. The night was warm for the eggs, but I thought she would desert, the eggs being fresh. However, at 5.42 a.m. on the 9th she returned and took up her usual routine. Again on the 12th at 11 p.m. she fluttered up the window and left the nest for the balance of the night. I now knew that, though the light was shaded all the time from her window, it was the amount of light in the room that upset her balance. On the first occasion (the 8th) it was the light which first troubled her, and the cat had been attracted by the noise. I used a screen against the window after this. This night was cold and windy, and I despaired of the partly incubated eggs (6 days). She returned at 5.19 a.m., being over six hours off the nest.

20/10/42.—The first two chicks were seen at 5.9 a.m., and the third was hatched during the day, being seen at 5.50 p.m. They were first fed with very small worms, the whole bunch being held in the beak while being fed to the chicks. They were sometimes unable to take food when she returned and she had to warm them by brooding until they were ready to feed. She held the worms in her beak while brooding. At other times they were unable to take all she brought, when she would brood for 3 to 4 minutes, holding the worms, and then feed them again.

20-23/10/42.—The hen brooded each time she returned with food, staying on the nest 8 minutes (max. 21, min 1) and being off it for 5 minutes (max. 10, min. 2).

24/10/42.—On this date she commenced returning for more food without brooding every time. No doubt feeding would be less frequent about the middle of the day.

"Bedmaking" seemed to be effected at odd times by a stirring up of the lining of the nest with the beak making a hollow trundling kind of noise. Once she raised her head with two short pieces of straw balanced across her forehead. She would select a part of the nest not covered by the chicks at the time. I am almost sure that she was not pursuing vermin.

Sanitation was achieved on the 20th and part of the 21st by the hen picking up the droppings from the nest floor and eating them. Later she took them from each chick as they appeared and ate them. This was done immediately after each feeding.

27/10/42.—One chick had its eyes open. Doubtful of other two.

28/10/42.—All three seen to have eyes open.

29/10/42.—They made their first cheeps on the arrival of food. At this time also it was noted that the chicks were all made to face in one direction for brooding the hen then sitting facing the same way.

30/10/42.—On this night and thereafter the hen did not stay on the nest at night. The chicks did not appear to be cold when examined before 5 a.m. on the 31st.

31/10/42.—The hen came with food at 5.2 a.m. and went on feeding.

1/11/42.—Chicks exercising wings noisily. 8.30 p.m., examined by torch. Droppings on and over edge of nest.

2/11/42.—One chick seen perched on edge of nest.

3/11/42.—First fed at 4.50 a.m. At 5.40 a.m. one fluttered voluntarily from the edge of the nest. The other two took fright at me and left also. One was immediately taken, I think by a rat. The hen fed the other two about the lawn.

28/11/42 (approx.).—Feeding ceased.

1/12/42.—One young seen feeding itself near parents and making a chirping like an attempt at song.

16/12/42.—Family all on lawn. Hen sunning herself and looking very worn.

The male bird I am sure did not assist with the building of the nest or the feeding of the chicks, either before or after leaving the nest. He sang a great deal until the hen commenced incubation, then dropped about 50 per cent. and continued at about the same rate. He took a prominent part in all alarms. In the case of another pair in a pine tree the male worked very hard feeding the young, both before and after their leaving the nest. It is well known that the male usually assists in building, but I noticed, in going five miles to and from work, that there were fewer males than females carrying building material. I think that it was this pair which deserted two partially incubated eggs earlier owing to my examining their nest in a camellia tree on the lawn (I now use a mirror on the end of a long stick to examine nests). They were probably a very young pair. Both were in fine plumage and appeared very healthy.

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