

## The Birds of Norfolk Island

By J. A. DE RAVIN, Glen Iris, Victoria.

Since Norfolk Island is an Australian territory with a growing tourist trade, it is surprising that no comprehensive account of its distinctive bird-life has been given in Australian publications.

The following notes are based on observations made during a visit to Norfolk Island between February 4 and 14, 1973; discussions with islanders, and researching such published literature as is available.

The Norfolk group of islands lie in latitude  $29^{\circ}$  S, some 1040 miles north-east of Sydney, and approximately midway between New Caledonia and New Zealand. New Caledonia, Norfolk Island and New Zealand are connected on the sea-bed by the Norfolk Island Ridge. Between this ridge and close to the Australian mainland lies the ocean deep Ulladulla Trough. There is thus no apparent east-west land bridge for the movement of birds between Australia and Norfolk Island.

Like Australia, Norfolk's land birds came from the island chain to the north, although at least one exception appears to be the extinct Philip Island Parrot, which came from the south.

The Group consists of the islands of Norfolk, and the uninhabited islands of Nepean and Philip, which lie respectively about one-half mile, and four miles to the south. Norfolk Island is a volcanic plateau five miles long by three miles wide; for the most part surrounded by precipitous cliffs, with an average height of 350 feet above sea-level. In the north of the island are two peaks, Mounts Pitt and Bates, which rise to 1000 feet.

When Captain Cook discovered Norfolk in 1774, the island was uninhabited, and covered with thick rain-forest; the most noticeable components of which are Norfolk Pines, *Araucaria heterophylla*, white oaks, *Lagunaria patersoni*, ironwoods, bloodwoods and ferns.

Between 1788 and 1814, and 1825 and 1856, the island was used as a convict settlement, and substantial parts of the land were cleared. In 1856 the Pitcairn Islanders migrated to Norfolk Island, and land was distributed in freehold blocks, aggregating 1,800 acres, with a strip of some 10 acres adjacent to the coast being retained as common grazing land or reserves. These commons and reserves remain; by far the largest being the Mount Pitt Reserve of 1,012 acres.

During the Second World War an aerodrome was constructed in the south-west of the island, and since 1960 increasing use of this facility has transformed the island economy to that of tourist resort.

It is convenient to recognize five bird-habitats.

Littoral. Including the off-shore islands, rocky-outcrops and cliffs; the prolific breeding grounds of sea-birds.

Rain-forests and fern-gullies. Principal of which is the Mount Pitt Reserve, but which also includes parts of freehold land not cleared, the home of indigenous land-birds.

Low-lying marshlands and streams. The habitat of freshwater birds and some migratory waders.  
Cultivated areas and grassed fields, including the aerodrome.  
Urban areas.

## DISCUSSION

The island is a paradise for sea-birds. The breeding petrels, prions, shearwaters or albatrosses of Lord Howe Island, New Zealand, or the sub-Antarctic zone, may be found spending the Antarctic winter in the warmer waters of the South-West Pacific. From the Northern Hemisphere, during the Arctic winter, many birds migrate southward. In addition to the numerous species of Waders, of which almost any species may be found on Norfolk Island, there are the terns and other pelagic species that nest on islands in these waters, as well as many species of land-birds that migrate to New Zealand, and other islands of these parts.

The habitats of the land-birds are threatened, since on an isolated island, where the bird population develops in a specialized way, the advance of pollution in the broad sense must necessarily put them in jeopardy.

Almost any of these birds may occur on the Norfolk islands, and you never know what you are likely to see next.

## SYSTEMATIC LIST

As far as possible sequence and names follow "An Index of Australian Bird Names", 1969, *CSIRO, Division of Wildlife Research Technical Paper No. 20*. A short description is added for those species which have not, so far, been included in Australian Field Guides.

### **Diomedea** spp., Albatross, spp.

Nomadic. Both Wandering, *D. exulans*, and Royal Albatross, *D. epomophora*, wander north to latitude 20°S (Mayr, 1945). On February 8, 1973, s.s. *Arcadia* was seen to pass Norfolk Island steaming northwards, followed by one of these birds, but the ship's smoke-stack impeded specific observation.

### **Macronectes** sp. Giant Petrel.

Nomadic. Wakelin (1968) observed two birds in August, 1967, which he identified as the southern species, *M. giganteus*. However, his description and their northern latitude suggests they may have been the northern species, *M. halli*.

### **Pterodroma nigripennis**, Black-winged Petrel.

Moderately common. Breeding. Usually seen in pairs flying in close formation. Inquisitive at times. Its call is like a tin-whistle note, repeated four times. Numbers are killed by feral cats.

### **P. melanops**, Brown-headed Petrel.

No longer breeding on Norfolk Island. This species is the "Bird of Providence" Muttonbird, which, in 1790, was killed in hundreds of thousands by marines and convicts, when supply ships failed to arrive. By 1800 the species, whose nesting burrows were on Mount Pitt, had ceased to exist on Norfolk. Its only known nesting place

is on Lord Howe Island. It has been suggested that an attempt be made to re-introduce the species on Norfolk Island, with young from Lord Howe.

***Puffinus pacificus***, Wedge-tailed Shearwater.

Common and breeding. Probably the commonest and most widespread shearwater in the South-West Pacific (Mayr, 1945). Cliff-tops on Norfolk Island are honeycombed with their burrows. In places, where cattle have grazed, this presents an erosion problem. Numbers are killed by feral cats. It is a remarkable experience watching birds return to their burrows in the fading light each evening.

***P. assimilis***, Little Shearwater.

Moderately common and breeding. Watching shearwaters return to their burrows, one evening, at Anson Point, one saw about one Little Shearwater for every ten Wedge-tails. While the latter were silent, the Little species was agitated at the presence of an intruder and uttered a doll-like squawk.

***Sula dactylatra***, Masked Booby.

Moderately common. The main breeding ground on Norfolk Island, and a tourist attraction, is at Rocky Point. A proposal to extend the aerodrome to take the large international jet aircraft would seriously threaten this Point.

***Phalacrocorax sulcirostris***, Little Black Cormorant.

Casual visitor, previously recorded.

***Fregata* sp.**, Frigatebird.

Casual visitor, but species not identified.

***Phaethon rubricauda***, Red-tailed Tropicbird.

Common and breeding. Seen nesting on cliff-faces all around the island.

***P. lepturus***, White-tailed Tropicbird.

Casual. At least one of this species seen with a flock of Red-tails near the Captain Cook Memorial, on northern cliffs. Observed with binoculars at less than 50 ft. (15 m). Diagnostic features of yellow bill, black wing-stripe and white tail-streamers confirmed by two other observers.

***Ardea novaehollandiae***, White-faced Heron.

Rather rare, but a pair of birds could usually be seen on Kingston Common. Breeding.

***Egretta alba***, White Egret.

Casual visitor, previously recorded.

***E. garzetta***, Little Egret.

Casual visitor, previously recorded.

***Threskiornis spinicollis***, Straw-necked Ibis.

Casual visitor, previously recorded.

***Platalea regia***, Royal Spoonbill.

Casual visitor, previously recorded.

***Anas superciliosa***, Black Duck.

Rather rare, due to lack of suitable habitat. Breeding. A pair

could usually be found at the water-mill. The common duck of the south seas (Mayr, 1945).

**Circus approximans**, Swamp Harrier.

Occasional winter visitor, but not seen on this trip.

**Falco cenchroides**, Nankeen Kestrel.

Casual visitor. A pair observed on three occasions. Upper parts appeared redder than those of the Australian variety.

**Lophortyx californicus**, California Quail.

Introduced, common on grasslands. Party of eight birds seen on Kingston Common.

**Rallus philippenis**, Banded Landrail.

Rare, breeding. Found in taro patches in creeks (Hull, 1909). Not seen by us.

**Porzana tabuensis**, Spotless Crake.

Very rare. Formerly widely reported (Hull, 1909), but since has fallen victim to the European rats.

**Porphyrio porphyrio**, Swampphen.

Common, especially on Mission Dam. Wakelin (1968) estimates there are 40 to 50 birds on the island. They may be shot under licence.

**Haematopus ostralegus**, Pied Oystercatcher.

Casual visitor. Not seen by us.

**Charadrius bicinctus**, Double-banded Dotterel.

Winter visitor from New Zealand.

**C. mongolus**, Mongolian Sand-Dotterel.

Casual visitor, one record (Turner *et al*, 1968).

**Pluvialis dominica**, Eastern Golden Plover.

Summer visitor; common on open grasslands, including aerodrome. Number of birds on the island would have exceeded one thousand.

**Arenaria interpres**, Turnstone.

A summer visitor. A flock of at least 50 birds could usually be seen near Point Hunter.

**Numenius phaeopus**, Whimbrel.

Summer visitor. About 20 birds on or near golf course.

**N. madagascariensis**, Eastern Curlew.

Summer visitor (Smithers & Disney, 1969). Not seen by us.

**Tringa nebularia**, Greenshank.

Rare summer visitor. Not seen by us.

**T. brevipes**, Grey-tailed Tattler.

Rare summer visitor. A single bird seen wading and feeding in a limpid pool near Point Ross. Permitted close approach. Slim appearance with eyebrow, upper parts lighter grey with wings and breast darker. Identified by double note call when flushed.

**T. incana**, Wandering Tattler.

Rare summer visitor. A second Tattler was seen on the day after the Grey-tailed species had been seen, this time on the rocks be-

tween Point Headland and Cemetery Beach. It was a uniformly darker bird, shy and seemed to delight feeding in the surf-spray, beyond effective viewing. Although it could always be found in the same area, it was not until the third visit that its call was heard, a quintuple staccato call, twice repeated.

**Calidris canutus**, Knot.

Rare summer visitor, not seen by us.

**C. ruficollis**, Red-necked Stint.

Summer visitor, not seen by us.

**Limosa lapponica**, Bar-tailed Godwit.

Summer visitor. About 20 birds seen on Kingston common.

**Himantopus himantopus**, White-headed Stilt.

Casual visitor, recorded.

**Stercorarius skua**, Southern Skua.

Casual visitor.

**Larus novaehollandiae**, Silver Gull.

Rare. A single adult bird seen on Kingston Common by two members of the party. Turner *et al* (1968) state that the species breeds on Philip Island.

**Chlidonias leucoptera**, White-winged Black Tern.

Casual visitor. Wakelin (1968) observed four in eclipse plumage in February 1967.

**Sterna fuscata**, Sooty Tern.

Common and breeding. Although Turner (*loc. cit.*) recommended that the open season, between October and November, for robbing eggs of this species be stopped, on the ground that the numbers of this bird were being noticeably reduced, the amended ordinance of May 28, 1970, still allows this pernicious practice. Any justification it may have had to supplement the frugal diet of Pitcairners has long since ceased to exist.

**Procelsterna cerulea**, Grey Noddy.

Moderately common. Breeding. Only small numbers seen at Cresswell Bay and Bird Rock. One delightfully inquisitive bird hovered within a few feet of our heads.

**Anous stolidus**, Noddy.

Common. Breeds on or near the ground on Philip Island. It would appear that one could identify this species from the White-capped Noddy by its wing-beats, which seem to be slower and stronger.

**A. minutus**, White-capped Noddy.

Common. Hundreds of these birds were nesting in pines and white oaks at Tetrarch Valley, a beautiful wooded area on the north coast, less than one half mile east of Mount Pitt Reserve. As this is the principal nesting area on Norfolk Island, there is a strong case to have Tetrarch Valley, which is on private property, included in the Reserve.

**Gygis alba**, White Noody.

Very common. Breeding in most areas on pines and white oaks

by laying the single egg, in a slight hollow or knot, on a horizontal branch. The life of a fledgling is precarious, and numbers fall to the ground, a prey for predators. The comment in Turner (loc. cit.) that the numbers of this species were decreasing is surprising, as it was the most common species on the island.

**Columba livia**, Domestic Pigeon.

Introduced. Moderately common in bush and cliff-faces. A shy species which has lost all traces of domesticity.

**Chalcophaps indica**, Green-winged Pigeon.

Moderately common and is now protected.

**Platycercus elegans**, Crimson Rosella.

Introduced and now very common. It is most disheartening to see the way in which this brash bird has taken over to the detriment of indigenous species.

**Cyanoramphus novaeseelandiae**, Red-fronted Parakeet.

Rather rare. We saw a colony of about ten birds which have adopted a peach tree garden, near Mount Pitt, denying the area even to Rosellas. The owner of the garden considers that their unexpected appearance in such numbers, may indicate that they are still present in the rain-forest in fair numbers. The species is also found in New Caledonia and New Zealand.

**Chrysococcyx lucidus**, Shining Bronze-Cuckoo.

Rare summer visitor, which occasionally breeds, using Warbler as host. Mainly summers in New Zealand and winters in the Solomons.

**Eudynamis taitensis**, Long-tailed Cuckoo.

Summer visitor. Breeding uncertain. Summers in New Zealand and winters in Polynesia. One bird that was probably this species was seen in a garden near Mount Pitt.

**Ninox novaeseelandiae**, Boobook Owl.

Rare. We heard this species calling from Mount Pitt during our stay.

**Tyto alba**, Barn Owl.

Rare. May be occasionally heard.

**Hirundapus caudacutus**, Spine-tailed Swift.

Transient. Smithers and Disney (1969) observed 12 birds over Mount Pitt.

**Halcyon sancta**, Sacred Kingfisher.

Common in open areas. Several nesting burrows seen.

**Eurystomus orientalis**, Dollarbird.

Casual visitor. Not seen by us.

**Lalage leucopyga**, Norfolk Island (Black and White) Sparrow.

Endemic. Rare. Described by Hull (1909) as a "bright and lively little bird — in considerable numbers", but not recorded by Wakelin (1968) or Smithers and Disney (1969). Rain-forest. Above, blue-black with whitish rump, and lateral tail-feathers tipped white; some white on wing; under buffy-white; bill and feet black; female similar but with upper parts blackish-brown, with

buffy-white on wing; length, 6 to 7 in. Six subspecies in the Southwest Pacific.

**Turdus merula**, Blackbird.

Introduced. Common all areas.

**T. poliocephalus**, Grey-headed Blackbird.

Very rare and restricted to rain-forest. Being driven out by the introduced European Blackbird (Smithers and Disney, 1969). Size and colour similar to female European Blackbird, but with a grey shawl thrown over head and neck. Bill and feet yellow.

**E. ericetorum**, Song Thrush.

Introduced and now common.

**Gerygone modesta**, Warbler.

Endemic. Moderately common in shrubs and rain-forest. A friendly bird which attracts attention with its pretty rise and fall warble. Dull brown above and grey below. Bill black and longish. Tail marked with white. Length 4 inches.

**Petroica multicolor**, Scarlet Robin.

Common in rain-forest. The breast of the male is darker than the Australian race. Also, the female is more colourful.

**Rhipidura fuliginosa**, Grey Fantail.

Moderately common in forested areas. A form, *R.f. pelzelni*, of the Australian species.

**Pachycephala xanthoprocta**, Norfolk Island Whistler.

Moderately common in forested areas but becoming scarcer. Head, grey tinged with olive, lores whitish; upper olive washed yellow with primaries buffy-yellow; tail, upper olive, under yellow; female, duller. Length 7 in. Has a typically "whistle" call. A friendly bird.

**Zosterops lateralis**, Grey-breasted Silvereye.

Common, especially in open spaces.

**Z. albularis**, White-breasted Silvereye.

Endemic.

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