BIRDS OF FANAL ISLAND, MOKOHINAU ISLANDS, NEW ZEALAND

by P.J. Bellingham
Department of Botany, University of Auckland, Private Bag, Auckland

SUMMARY

Twenty-four species of birds are recorded for the island. Five pelagic species, and nineteen land species were noted. The species found on this visit are discussed with respect to the geography and vegetation of the island.

INTRODUCTION

Fanal Island is a comparatively isolated, small volcanic island with a vegetation severely modified by successive burnings. Only a small amount of mature coastal forest remains. The vegetation of the island is described by Wright (1980a). Its relative proximity to larger, more heavily forested islands, e.g. Great and Little Barrier Islands, may allow sporadic visits from some bird species, but the island is depauperate in many smaller bush species. Observations of birds are recorded for a one week visit to Fanal Island by the Auckland University Field Club in May, 1979.

METHODS

In the time spent on the island, as much of the land was traversed as possible. In the week only a small region at the north-west of the island was not investigated. All birds seen were noted. Lack of spot-lighting equipment made investigation of incoming sea bird species impossible, although burrows were investigated. Nomenclature follows the Ornithological Society of New Zealand (1970).

OBSERVATIONS

Grey-faced petrel, *Pterodroma macroptera gouldi*

Common breeder on the island, arrived at c. 2000 hours. Burrows numerous at various parts of the island. One dead bird c. 200m from the camp site.

Australian gannet, *Sula bassana serrator*

Commonly seen fishing waters around the island.

Pied shag, *Phalacrocorax varius varius*

Colony of 17 at the head of the Northern Valley, and up to 5 on a stack at the south-west of the island.
Australasian harrier, *Circus approximans gouldi*
   One seen circling the south-west end of the island.
Southern black-backed gull, *Larus dominicanus*
   Five seen circling the stack on the north-east of the island.
Red-billed gull, *Larus novaehollandiae scopulinus*
   Two seen roosting on the stack at the south-west end of the island.
White-fronted tern, *Sterna striata*
   One seen fishing off the landing site at the south-east end of the island.
New Zealand pigeon, *Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae novaeseelandiae*
   Common through kohekohe (*Dysoxylum spectabile*) and puriri (*Vitex lucens*) forest at the south-east end. Notably less common through the rest of the island.
North Island kaka, *Nestor meridionalis septentrionalis*
   One seen at the south-east end of the island, and ranging to at least the centre of the island. Roosted for 3 nights in a large pohutukawa (*Metrosideros excelsa*) over the campsite. Observed for about 1/2 hour feeding on unripe kohekohe fruit, by grasping the fruit in one claw, puncturing the fruit with both mandibles, and extracting the seeds with the tongue. Also observed investigating a polythene sheet arranged to collect water, and descending gradually into the sheet to drink the contents.
Red-crowned parakeet, *Cyanoramphus novaeezelandiae novaeezelandiae*
   Abundant throughout the island over all vegetation types.
Morepork, *Ninox novaeezelandiae novaeezelandiae*
   One seen roosting in a sapling in the Central Valley.
New Zealand kingfisher, *Halcyon sancta vagans*
   Occasional in coastal pohutukawa and roosting in crevices in the cliffs.
Welcome swallow, *Hirundo tahitica neoxena*
   Three seen swooping overhead on the north-east cliffs beyond the campsite.
New Zealand pipit, *Anthus novaeezelandiae novaeezelandiae*
   Pair seen in *Hymenanthera* scrub between the Southern and Central Valleys.
Hedge sparrow, *Prunella modularis occidentalis*
   Occasional in *Leptospermum* scrub between the Southern and Central Valleys.
North Island fantail, *Rhipidura fuliginosa placabilis*
   Common throughout all forest types.
Blackbird, *Turdus merula merula*
   Common through *Leptospermum* scrub particularly, but also through most other forest types.
Silvereye, *Zosterops lateralis lateralis*
   Common throughout all forest types.
Bellbird, *Anthornis melanura melanura*
- Abundant through all forested areas.

Tui, *Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae novaeseelandiae*
- Occasional through most forest types, though relatively common through kohekohe/puriri forest of the south-east end. Notably less common generally than bellbird.

Yellow hammer, *Emberiza citrinella sylvesteris*
- Two seen flying over *Hymenanthera* scrub at the extreme north of the island.

Goldfinch, *Carduelis carduelis britannica*
- Four seen flying over *Hymenanthera* scrub at the extreme north of the island.

Starling, *Sturnus vulgaris vulgaris*
- Occasional small flocks over flax (*Phormium tenax*) areas and in *Leptospermum* scrub.

Indian myna, *Acridotheres tristis*
- Occasional over flax areas.

**DISCUSSION**

Fanal Island’s isolation, along with its disturbed forest, result in a small number of species at present. However, if future regeneration and establishment of the forest is allowed to continue, the potential for a greater variety of species may be realised.

Because of Fanal Island’s position at the perimeter of the Hauraki Gulf, it is expected that the island would support a sizeable population of either breeding or roosting sea-birds - predominantly petrel species (Veitch pers. comm.). In pre-European times and less often in recent times, before the island was declared a reserve, the island had been ‘muttonbirded’. Large quantities of bones above the landing at the south-west end of the island confirm this. ‘Muttonbirding’ activities also may have been the reason for burning the island in the past (Wright 1980b).

The main ‘muttonbird’ of the island is grey-faced petrel. Unfortunately lack of spot-lighting equipment did not allow capture of live birds. Burrows are particularly common at the south-west and south-east corners of the island, and above all at the northern slopes of the north-west end of the island *Hymenanthera* scrub. Burrows were examined for nesting birds on several occasions as these petrels begin laying eggs in May (Falla *et al.* 1979). None were located, however; perhaps the survey was conducted slightly too early. One dead, fairly young, bird was found.

Sooty shearwater (*Puffinus griseus*) is recorded breeding “five to six months” after the grey-faced petrels (Roberts 1953). Allied shearwater (*Puffinus assimilis haurakiensis*) is reported from the island (Veitch 1973) who found a single dead bird. None were found in
burrows but it is likely to be present as a breeder, being present on other islands of the Mokohinau Group (McCallum 1980). Fluttering shearwater (*Puffinus gavia gavia*) is also likely to be present on the island from August (Veitch pers. comm.).

Fanal Island's isolation has meant a notable absence of small bush birds, despite no apparent lack of suitable habitat. Most conspicuous by its absence was grey warbler (*Gerygone igata igata*). Two pairs of pied tits (*Petroica macrocephala toitoi*) were reported near waterholes, presumably in the Central Valley, by Roberts (1953). None were heard or seen in seven days on the island. A Wildlife Service survey of Fanal Island does not record pied tits either (Veitch 1973). It is probable that the birds were either passing migrants, or if breeding in 1952, have since died out. The other small birds, - silvereyes and fantails - are common and breeding on the island.

Larger bush birds, especially bellbirds, tuis and red-crowned parakeets are common and breeding on the island. Wood pigeons, although found over the whole island, were common only in the forest around the campsite. Moreporks were heard occasionally and one was seen roosting in the Central Valley. The populations of larger bush birds probably originate from nearby Little Barrier or Great Barrier Islands. One notable record is that of a kaka. The bird was heard on several occasions in mature forest, and was seen to roost in a large pohutukawa for three nights. (Feeding of this kaka is described by Matthews 1980). Kakas may be breeding residents; Roberts (1953) reported hearing a kaka in his 1952 visit. Veitch did not record kakas in 1973. It is possible that the kaka is a migrant - Roberts (1953) reports kaka as an annual visitor on Burgess Island and McCallum (1980) reported a kaka from Burgess Island in the same week that our party was on Fanal Island. Perhaps kakas reported from the Mokohinau Islands are adventurous representatives of the populations on Great Barrier, Little Barrier or Hen Islands.

North Island saddlebacks (*Philesturnus carunculatus rufusater*) were taken from the population on Taranga (Hen) Island and were liberated on Fanal Island in February 1968 by the Wildlife Service. Veitch located only three male birds in November 1973 and the liberation was deemed a failure due to a lack of roosting holes (Veitch pers. comm.). These birds were not seen on the present visit; the last of the liberated birds are assumed to have died out.

A new native bird species recorded for Fanal Island was welcome swallow, seen flying over the north end of the island. This is not surprising in view of colonisation by this species through the whole of the country. Two other new records are that of pipits in open scrub at the north end of the island and kingfishers around the coast. Also notable was the large roost of pied shags on several pohutukawa trees. Veitch (1973) describes this species as being few and non-breeding in
status. Unfortunately the roost was too inaccessible to be able to confirm whether the birds were on nests, however it seems very likely that breeding occurs here.

Of particular interest on this visit was the addition of three introduced species to previous lists: hedge sparrows in *Leptospermum* scrub, and yellow hammers and goldfinches in *Hymenanthera* and over open ground at the north of the island. This is noteworthy as small native birds, especially grey warblers, have either not arrived, or failed to become established on Fanal Island. Other introduced species, namely starlings and blackbirds are fairly common, and mynas less so.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank party members who provided assistance in the field, E.A. Brown for critically reading the manuscript and Ms K. Bellingham for typing.

REFERENCES
