ON A COLLECTION OF BIRDS AND EGGS FROM THE TRISTAN D'ACUNHA ISLANDS, MADE BY JOHN KIRBY

BY AUSTIN ROBERTS, D.Sc. WITH NOTES BY JOHN KIRBY

WHILE stationed at Tristan d'Acunha during the late war, Mr John Kirby was able to make a small collection of bird skins and eggs, the cost of which was kindly defrayed by the Trustees of the South African Bird Book Fund and the collection donated to the Transvaal Museum.

Mr Kirby records the following upon the difficulties encountered in making the collection in islands adjacent to Tristan d'Acunha itself (which is a sanctuary):

'Collecting birds and eggs on the Tristan group of islands usually necessitated a trip to Nightingale or Inaccessible, as, except under exceptional circumstances, it is not permitted to take either birds or eggs from Tristan d'Acunha itself. The 20 miles journey over the open sea to Nightingale is performed in thirty-foot canvas boats. This is due to the necessity of having boats which can be lifted out of the water on to rock ledges, and carried out of range of the pounding breakers, as there are no suitable landing beaches.

In the case of the more common birds like the yellow-billed albatross, rockhopper penguin and great shearwater, it is merely a matter of stooping down and picking up the specimens required; but some of the less plentiful varieties are very difficult to find or reach. Some idea of the numbers of birds on the islands may be gained from the fact that from about the 10th of September each year about fifty islanders each collect about 500 penguin and from 100 to 200 yellow-billed albatross eggs, without making any noticeable impression on the numbers. It is the same in November with the shearwater eggs, when there are so many birds that there is not sufficient room in the soft ground for all of them to burrow in and the islanders collect most of their requirements on the surface without the necessity of risking a torn hand from the irate occupant of a nest in a burrow.

The main requirements, however, for collecting on the Tristan group are a good head for heights, a good sea-going stomach and a good appetite for a diet of young albatrosses and shearwaters, should the weather "block" you and the rations give out.'

In the following, Mr Kirby's notes are given in brackets, and the rest are compiled by me from a study of the specimens.

ROCKHOPPER PENGUIN

Eudyptes cristatus (Miller)

One skin, partial albino, the hinder half of body and the tail being whitish, Nightingale Island, December 1945. Two eggs, September 1945: white with a greenish tinge; measurements 70·5 × 54·5 and 71·5 × 53 mm. One egg, same

month, measurements 72 × 53 mm. One small egg, same month, 50·2 × 38 mm. One small egg, same month, similar but slightly stained and noduled at the thin end, measuring 40 × 36 mm. One small egg, same month, much covered with light-brown blood stains and noduled at both ends, 39 × 32 mm. One small egg, with a prominent wormlike excrescence at the thin end, 58 (61 including excrescence) × 45·3 mm. One very small egg, noduled at both ends, 31 × 26·5 mm.

[*Notes.*

(1) Lays on approximately 10 September. Clutch of 3 eggs, one usually small, one medium size and one large. The small egg varies enormously in size and some are found only $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (19 mm.) in length. Only 2 eggs are hatched and the small egg is rejected.

(2) It nests in vast rookeries, some situated almost at the water's edge, but others several hundred feet up the cliffs and extending in some places nearly half a mile inland.

(3) When they are coming in from the sea they make for the rocks in series of porpoise-like leaps and dives.

(4) In spite of their ungainly build, they are extremely agile and climb up slippery almost perpendicular rock-faces with comparative ease.

(5) When nest-building operations are in progress, much thieving of nest-material goes on. While one pair may be collecting a piece of tussock each, their neighbours filch those just put in place, while their neighbours in turn are doing the same thing.

(6) Barnacles (i.e. *Lepas*) have been observed on the tail feathers of penguins coming up to moult.

(7) Adults arrive and land to moult about 1 February and remain until the middle of March. They come again about the middle of August to build their nests and lay on 10 September, remaining until 1 January.

(8) Youngsters, as soon as they are fully fledged, swim off to sea in January. They come back for their first moult in December, when their plumes first appear. They are then mature and carry on as such.

(9) The penguins will not feed their young when away from the nest, and use their flippers to drive their young back to the nest.]

GIANT ALBATROSS, *Diomedea exulans* Linn.

1 ♀ skin, Inaccessible Island, February 1946. One egg, 24 January 1946, Inaccessible Island: white with some light stains and underlying pale slate markings at the thick end, long oval in shape, 134 × 77 mm.

[*Notes.*

(1) Lays in January, only a single egg.

(2) Incubation period approximately 3 months.

(3) The nest is not circular as in other albatrosses, but slightly elongate.

(4) The young bird of the previous year usually flies just before the next egg is laid. If, however, it has not flown, a new nest is built a couple of feet away.

(5) The birds become lighter coloured with age.

(6) One pair has been known to nest on the same site for 14 years in succession.

(7) One has been seen to swallow a medium-sized snoek, about 2 ft. in length, at one gulp.

(8) One was seen to attack and kill a mollymawk that was feeding on a dead snoek. The latter was eaten, but the mollymawk was left untouched.

(9) The nest I did not see, but the islanders informed me that it was about 24 in. long and 20 in. wide, tapering slightly. It is built of mud and grass in the same way as that of the yellow-billed albatross.]

LIGHT-MANTLED SOOTY ALBATROSS, *Phoebetria palpebrata palpebrata* (Forster), 'PEEU'

1 ♂, Nightingale Island, 29 September 1945; 2 single eggs, 29 September 1945, Nightingale Island: one white with light brown scattered markings and speckles, mainly at the thin end and larger markings in part in the middle, 102·2 × 68·5 mm., the other more pointed at the thin end and with a few small brown markings in the middle and towards the thick end, 100·5 × 66 mm.

[*Notes.*

(1) Lays in the middle to end of September, only a single egg.
(2) Utters a peculiar wailing cry, like a baby, hence the local name of 'Peeu'.
(3) Incubation period about 2 months.
(4) Nests in small rookeries ranging from 3 or 4 to 20 or 30 pairs.
(5) The nest almost identical with that of the yellow-billed albatross, and approximately 12 in. in diameter and varying between 6 and 18 in. in height.]

YELLOW-BILLED ALBATROSS, *Nealbatrus chlororhynchus chlororhynchus* (Gmelin), 'MOLLYMAWK'

1 ♂, Nightingale Island, September 1945; 5 single eggs, September 1945, Nightingale Island: (1) white, plentifully speckled with light reddish at the thick end and thence to the middle, but fading out almost entirely at the thin end, 97 × 62 mm.; (2) white with a ring towards the thick end of reddish fine speckles and some spots, the rest slightly stained, 98·8 × 61·8 mm.; (3) like (2), but speckles covering the thick end, 93 × 63·5 mm.; (4) white with a fainter and only partial ring near the thick end, the rest plain, but stained, 101 × 63·7 mm.; (5) plain white, 94·5 × 63·2 mm.

[*Notes.*

(1) Lays on approximately 10 September on Nightingale Island and 18 September on Inaccessible Island, only a single egg.
(2) Incubation period about 2 months.
(3) Nests all over the islands, but tends to form rookeries in suitable places. On Nightingale Island they favour three weed 'vleis', where they nest in hundreds.
(4) The nest is made by adults walking round in a circle and scraping up mud and grass with their bills. They take it in turns to sit in the centre and scrape and stamp with their feet.
(5) The same nests are used every year, but not always by the same pair of birds.
(6) They cannot take off without a run of 4 or 5 yards, usually on a down grade.
(7) The young bird when chipping out of the shell makes a terrific noise, which is audible several yards away.
(8) If the nest is approached by an enemy, the mother puts a foot on top of the newly hatched chick to protect it and snaps her bill like castanets to frighten the enemy away.
(9) The young defend themselves by regurgitating food—very accurately up to 6 ft.
(10) The mother will not feed her chick unless it is on the nest. A mother has been seen to beat a chick (nearly fully fledged) with her wings and drive it over a hundred yards through the tussocks, in spite of much pleading, until it eventually arrived at and got on to the nest, when it was duly fed.

(11) Chicks were found infested with blue cattle ticks under their bills and on their throats, although the adults had none. In spite of this, ticks have never been found on the island cattle.

(12) When they first fly they are often attacked by sea hens (skuas) in the air and when they regurgitate in retaliation the sea hens plummet down and catch the food in mid-air.

(13) Adults are also attacked by sea hens, but it requires two of them to 'hammer' a mollymawk.]

MOLLYMAWK, *Thalassarche melanophris melanophris* (Temm.), 'CAPE MOLLY'

A head and tail only.

[*Notes.*

(1) Known locally as a white-billed variety of the mollymawk (that is, yellow-billed albatross).

(2) Slightly larger than that species.

(3) Seen on the water or flying around off shore, but never known to nest here.]

ANTARCTIC SKUA, *Stercorarius a. antarctica* (Lesson), 'SEA HEN'

One skin, Tristan d'Acunha, January 1946. Three eggs, Inaccessible Island, October 1944: (1) dull pale yellowish clouded with faint brownish, overlaid with small dark slate and large brown or reddish brown splashes, 71·5 × 51·6 mm.; (2) darker than (1) in ground colour, and splashed heavily at the thinner end, 73·5 × 52·5 mm.; (3) broken, dull pale yellowish, not clouded, spotted with dull slate and brown or reddish brown and occasional larger splashes of brownish, 73·2 × 53 mm.

[*Notes.*

(1) Lays at the end of October to middle of November, clutch of 3 eggs.

(2) Very vicious. It pecks out the eyes of penguins and then proceeds to disembowel and eat them while they are still alive. It also kills young birds on a large scale and attacks young mollymawks in the air, forcing them to regurgitate and then catching and consuming the vomited food in the air.

(3) Extremely bold, trying to steal bait and fish from boats out on fishing excursions.

(4) Eats any carrion it can find.

(5) No proper nest is built, just a depression in the grass or ferns.

(6) Kills and eats adult mollymawks, though it requires two sea hens to kill one mollymawk.]

GREATER SHEARWATER, *Ardenna gravis* (O'Reilly), 'PETREL'

One skin, Nightingale Island, February 1946; also a head; 2 single eggs, Nightingale Island, 25 November 1945: (1) white, stained, 81 × 52 mm.; (2) white, slightly stained, 71·5 × 47 mm.

[*Notes.*

(1) Lays approximately on 10 November, a single egg.

(2) The egg is extremely large for the size of the bird.

(3) Nests in burrows about 3 ft. deep, the enlarged end roughly lined with grass.

(4) It utters a plaintive cry, like that of a baby.

(5) Breeds chiefly on Nightingale and Inaccessible Islands now, as it has been killed off on Tristan d'Acunha Island. It is almost impossible to take a step anywhere on soft soil on Nightingale Island without treading in a petrel hole or sinking down into a burrow.

(6) At sunset, when the birds come back from their fishing operations, the sky becomes almost black with the countless wheeling thousands of these birds. The noise too is almost deafening.

(7) They are very graceful and agile in flight, but have very little idea of how to land on the ground—just making roughly for the locality of their nests and hitting trees or tussocks or the ground with a terrific thud, then scrambling or fluttering the rest of the way in a most ungainly fashion.

(8) Youngsters when pulled out of their nests regurgitate their food in self-defence.

FULMAR OR GREAT GREY PETREL, *Adamastor gelida* (Gmelin), 'PETTY UNKER'

1 ♀, Tristan d'Acunha Island, April 1946; 1 egg, 16 April 1946, Tristan d'Acunha: white, 80 × 56·2 mm.

[*Notes.*

(1) Lays approximately 10 April, a single egg.

(2) Nests in small caves scraped out in a bank or cliff, usually many feet up a mountain side.]

CAPE HEN, *Procellaria aequinoctialis aequinoctialis* (Lin.), 'RING EYE'

1 ♀, Inaccessible Island, January 1946.

[*Notes.*

(1) Lays in October, a single egg.

(2) One of the few birds not afraid of the skua.]

TRISTAN BROAD-BILLED PETREL, *Pachyptila vittata keyteli* (Mathews), 'NIGHT BIRD'

Two skins, Tristan d'Acunha Island, September 1945; 2 eggs, Tristan d'Acunha, 5 October 1945; 2 eggs, Nightingale Island, September 1945: (1) and (2) white, 50·4 × 36·2 and 50·2 × 35·3 mm.; (3) stained creamy colour, 50·1 × 36·2 mm.; (4) stained dark reddish brown all over, 49 × 36 mm.

[*Notes.*

(1) Lays towards the end of August, a single egg.

(2) Nests in caves or burrows in the ground.

(3) Entirely nocturnal in habits.

(4) Some caves contain thousands of these birds nesting in crevices and on ledges; no nest is built and the egg is merely laid on the bare ground or rock.

(5) Just prior to a change in the weather and backing of the wind, 'Night birds' become very active and are seen in far greater numbers than otherwise.]

DIVING PETREL, *Pelecanoides urinatrix dacunhae* Nicoll, 'FLYING PENGUIN'

1 ♀, Nightingale Island, September 1945; 3 eggs, Nightingale Island, September 1945: (1) cloudy white, 37·3 × 30·7 mm.; (2) stained creamy colour, 35·6 × 30·7 mm.; (3) like (2) in colour, 37·5 × 28·8 mm.

[*Notes.*

(1) Lays in September, a single egg.
(2) Nests in burrows.]

WHITE-FRINGED STORM PETREL, *Fregetta grallaria aquerea* Kuhl., 'SKIPJACK'

One skin, Nightingale Island, March 1946.

[*Notes.*

(1) Lays in January, a single egg.
(2) Nests in burrows in the ground; often disused giant shearwater holes or crevices in the rocks are used.
(3) The name of 'Skipjack' is derived from its peculiar kangaroo-like jumps on the surface of the water when feeding.]

KERGUELEN FULMAR, *Pterodroma brevirostris* (Lesson), 'BLUE BIRD'

1 ♀ skin, Inaccessible Island, January 1946.
This specimen is slightly smaller in the wing and tail than those recorded from Kerguelen Island, measuring, wing 225, tail 76, tarsus 37, middle toe and claw 45, culmen 28, as compared with, respectively, 254, 91, 35·5, 45, 25·3 mm.

[*Note.*

The islanders say they have only seen it once or twice before.]

SILVER-GREY PETREL, *Priocella antarctica* (Stephens)

One skin, without a label, but probably from near Inaccessible Island.

[*Note.*

Resurrected from a loft by an islander, who had killed it on the water when he was out fishing, and previously unknown to him.]

KERGUELEN TERN, *Sterna vittata vittata* Gmelin, 'KING BIRD'

1 ♂, Nightingale Island, December 1945; 2 eggs, Nightingale Island, 1 December and January 1945: (1) dull pale yellowish, with fine markings and larger spots all over, the thick end with dark slate and large brown blotches and lines, 45 × 31·5 mm.; (2) similar, but with larger dark blotches, 45·5 × 30 mm.

[*Notes.*

(1) Lays in November and December, only a single egg.
(2) The nest is small and composed of grass and seaweed, usually placed in an extremely inaccessible position on a rock-face.
(3) Hovers and dives like a kingfisher and lives chiefly on small sardine-like fish and sand fleas.
(4) If a 'King bird' is attacked by a skua, others come to its assistance, diving and screaming at the attacker, and very often successfully driving it off.]

ATLANTIC NODDY, *Anous stolidus*, 'WOOD PIGEON'

One skin, Nightingale Island, December 1945; 4 eggs, Nightingale Island: (1) January 1945, pale pinkish with pale slate blue markings all over, overlaid with scattered brown, or brownish red, markings, which are mainly concentrated at the thick end and conspicuous, 45 × 33·6 mm.; (2) similar to (1) in ground colour, but lacking the large markings, the brownish red marks much smaller, 50·5 × 34·3 mm.; (3) and (4) 23 November 1945, both pinky white, marked like

(3), but one with a ring at the thick end and the other with the markings inside the ring as well at the thick end, 51·8 × 34·2 and 51·3 × 35·3 mm.

[*Notes.*

(1) Lays in November, only 1 egg.

(2) The nest is a rough structure of grass and seaweed, placed in a crevice on a cliff-face, or just inside the mouth of a cave.

(3) Very graceful fliers and extremely courageous in defence of their eggs and young.

(4) They steal nesting material from 'King birds' and each other.

(5) The chicks run around the nest after about a week.]

AMERICAN GALLINULE, *Porphyrula martinica* (Linn.), 'GUTTER SNAKE'

One skin, immature (?), Tristan d'Acunha, April 1945.

I conclude this is immature from the colour, which is as follows: the top of head light olive brown, becoming paler buffy brown on the sides of face and merging into the whitish of chin and upper throat; from the nape the colour changes to a greenish olive tinge down the hind neck, becoming olive-brown on the upper parts of body and scapulars, the tail lighter brownish olive; purple and greenish feathers are intermingled on the breast and sides of neck with unglossed feathers and much white is present down the middle of the breast, indicative of juvenility as a rule in members of the family. The glossy green feathers on the sides of the neck extend over the upper wing-coverts and outer edge of the outer primaries, merging into the olive of the mantle and scapulars; the inside of the primaries, secondaries and axillaries is dark greyish brown, but the under wing-coverts are broadly tipped with white. In the skin the bill is pale yellowish, darker on the frontal shield, and the legs and feet are light olive. Measurements: wing length 170; tail 66; tarsus 58; middle toe with claw 40; culmen to back of frontal shield 44·5 mm.

The species is distributed over eastern South America, Central America, West Indies and as far north as the New England States, and once from Great Britain, which seems to indicate its capacity for long migration and may account for its presence in Tristan d'Acunha. If a resident, perhaps adults will prove to be different from the American species.

[*Notes.*

Just before I left the island, a couple of gallinules were seen in the New Zealand flax growing along the borders of a stream in the village, but although I searched carefully I could find no trace of nesting operations. I wonder how a bird of such limited powers of flight comes to be in, and manages to survive on, such a desolate spot.]

TRISTAN THRUSH, *Nesocichla eremita gordoni* Stenhouse, 'STARCHY'

Two skins, Nightingale Island, September 1945; two clutches of 2 eggs each: colour pale greenish blue, thickly covered with brownish red speckles and slightly larger markings, 31·5 × 21·5, 30·5 × 21·7 mm. and 32·4 × 22·5, 32 × 22·4 mm.

[*Notes.*

(1) Lays early in September, usually 3 eggs.

(2) The nest is large, fairly neatly lined with grass, placed on a ledge or any conveniently sheltered spot, often inside the shacks built by the islanders on Nightingale Island.

(3) Extremely tame, friendly and mischievous. Very destructive, and cigarettes left lying around are speedily torn to shreds. They are born thieves, and steal

boxes of matches and anything they can carry. One sat on the end of my fishing rod and chirped at me, until disturbed when I struck at a fish! When raising a brood in one of the huts they are quite unperturbed by the presence of human beings and carry on their domestic duties as usual.

(4) 'Starchy' breaks and eats any eggs it can get at, except that of a penguin, the shell of which is too hard. It will even eat one of its own eggs if removed from the nest and placed a short distance away.]

TRISTAN SISKIN, *Nesospiza acunhae questi* Lowe, 'CANARY'

One skin, Nightingale Island, September 1945.

[*Notes.*

(1) Lays in December, 4 or 5 eggs.
(2) The nest is small and cunningly concealed in a tussock and rarely found.]

TRISTAN SEEDEATER, *CRITHAGROIDES* n.g., genotype *Nesospiza wilkinsi* Lowe

1 ♂ skin, Nightingale Island, February 1946.

It is obvious at a glance that this bird is more closely related to the thick-billed seedeaters of Africa (*Crithagra*) than *Nesospiza*, which in turn is related to the siskins (*Spinus*), and that *Nesocichla* is related to *Psophocichla* of Africa; but *Crithagroides* differs in several important respects from *Crithagra*, in larger size, the bill longer and stouter, the culmen of which forms a broad ridge with a slight groove on each side, the cutting edge of the mandible straight instead of arching slightly from base to tip, the legs stouter and tail longer relative to wing-length (88% as compared with 75%). The genus *Crithagra* has not been recognized by some recent authors as distinct from *Serinus*, but any impartial student will agree that the separation is sound and certainly better justified than the separation of *Nesospiza* from *Spinus*, or *Nesocichla* from *Psophocichla*, to give only a few instances.