

SHORT NOTES

Notes on certain Cook Islands birds

In September-October 1995 I spent 24 days in the Cook Islands including Rarotonga (25-29 September, 16-19 October), Mangaia (29 September to 4 October), Aitutaki (4-10 October) and 'Atiu (10-16 October). Published information on Cook Islands birds is still sparse, so the following notes arising from my field observations, and from specimens in the Auckland Museum collection, seem worth recording.

MURPHY'S PETREL *Pterodroma ultima*

Auckland Museum has a study skin (AIM B6902) of a large, all-dark petrel with streaks of white on the chin (wing 292 mm, tail 117 mm, exposed culmen 31.5 mm, tarsus 40.0 mm). It is attributed to "Cook Islands" and belongs to a small collection of skins and eggs from the Cook and Solomon Islands made by R.W. Gosset of Sydney and presented to the museum in 1927. Gosset lived on Rarotonga "and adjacent islands" between about 1899 and 1904 (Anonymous 1940), so the petrel was likely to have been collected then from Rarotonga or perhaps one of the other southern Cook Islands.

B6902 was first catalogued as *Pterodroma neglecta*, but re-determined by R.A. Falla, and more recently confirmed by M.J. Imber (pers. comm.), as *P. ultima*. Murphy's Petrel breeds east of the Cook Islands in the Austral, Tuamotu and Pitcairn groups (Mayr & Cottrell 1979, Holyoak & Thibault 1984). It has not been previously recorded from the Cook Islands.

REEF HERON *Egretta sacra*

In the tropical Pacific this species usually forages at the shore or, if inland, at wet sites. On 1 October, on Mangaia, a dark-phase bird was foraging in roadside grass beside the road through the *makatea* (raised limestone) where it was separated from the shore by about 50 m of forest. The heron was stalking and catching what appeared to be lizards. The two skinks *Emoia cyanura* and *Cryptoblepharus poecilopleurus* were very numerous at the time sun-basking along the roadside.

GREY DUCK *Anas superciliosa*

This species has a precarious existence on the southern Cook Islands because of persecution (Holyoak 1980). I saw a flock of about 15 on the small lake inland from Ivarua, Mangaia (1 October). On 'Atiu I saw two near Lake Teroto (13 October) and two near the 'Atiu Motel (15 October).

COMMON NODDY *Anous stolidus*

In the Auckland Museum collection there are three eggs of this species (AIM B5246-8) from Manuae (Hervey Island) collected by R.W. Gosset, probably 1899-1904 (see Murphy's Petrel). Manuae was not listed by Holyoak (1980) as part of the breeding range of Common Noddies, and was given as a likely nesting island by Holyoak & Thibault (1984).

COOK ISLANDS FRUIT-DOVE *Ptilinopus rarotongensis*

During 14 hours of walking in the southern half of 'Atiu, spread over four days, I saw or heard 16 fruit-doves. One was collecting twigs for a nest. On Rarotonga I heard one in the Avatiu Valley close to town (17 October).

PACIFIC PIGEON *Ducula pacifica*

During 14 hours of walking in the southern half of 'Atiu, spread over four days, I saw or heard four Pacific Pigeons. The pigeon seemed less abundant on 'Atiu than the fruit-dove, which was also the impression of Taylor (1984) during a visit in December 1983.

TAHITI LORIKEET (KURAMO'O) *Vini peruviana*

Wilson (1993) surveyed the distribution and abundance of this species on Aitutaki during five days in February 1991. She found few birds in the south, as had been noted in two previous unpublished reports which she cited. During my visit this did not seem to be so. My accommodation was in the valley immediately inland from Arutanga and the lorikeet was common there, calling and feeding throughout daylight hours. During a walk from Arutanga to Te Koutu Point, the southern tip of the island, I saw and heard lorikeets frequently. On another day I heard several near Vaipae jetty in the south-east and twice saw them along the road there from Arutanga.

K.-J. Wilson (in litt.) spent two weeks on Aitutaki in July 1993 and "found a more even distribution of Kuramo'o than reported in my paper ... Densities were low in the coastal hibiscus forest in the south and west ... but birds were seen over virtually all of the island. ... I trapped rodents during my visit, ... and in 99 trap-nights caught four kiore [*Rattus exulans*] and one mouse [*Mus musculus*]."

The Cook Islands Natural Heritage Project, based on surveys in 1992 and 1994, estimates that the total population of this species on Aitutaki is about 1,200 birds (G. McCormack, pers. comm.). Systematic rodent-trapping by the Project in February and March 1994 in various habitats yielded *R. exulans* and *M. musculus* but no *R. rattus* (G. McCormack, pers. comm.). Aitutaki may currently lack the latter species of rat, which would help to explain the good numbers of lorikeets. Lories of the genus *Vini* have disappeared from many small Pacific Islands with *R. rattus*.

The first verified Tahiti Lorikeet nest on Aitutaki was observed by W. Jankowski, 17-24 October 1993 (G. McCormack, pers. comm.). It was 11 m above ground in a hole at the base of a broken branch of a Java Plum (*Syzygium cumini*).

LONG-TAILED CUCKOO *Eudynamys taitensis*

On 'Atiu I twice glimpsed a cuckoo being pursued through *makatea* forest by a Chattering Kingfisher. The first occasion (11 October) was in the south-west; the second (12 October) in the east. The Long-tailed Cuckoo is commonest in the region from March to August (Holyoak 1980).

'ATIU SWIFTLET *Collocalia sawtelli*

'Atiu supports less than 500 breeding adults of this supposedly endemic species (Tarburton 1990, Steadman 1991). Though I saw numerous birds foraging during my stay, they seemed much less common than White-rumped Swiftlets (*C. spodiopygia*)

TABLE 1 - Number of active nests of 'Atiu Swiftlets (*Collocalia sawtelli*) at two breeding caves on 'Atiu. Data for 1987-88 by Tarburton (1990); otherwise by R. and J. Dobbs for the Cook Islands Natural Heritage Project (G. McCormack, pers. comm.).

	1987-88	1994-95	1995-96
Takitaki	74	82	69
Tupuranga	116	90	106
Total	190	172	175

are on Tongan islands like Tongatapu, 'Eua and Vava'u. The Cook Islands Natural Heritage Project recently surveyed active nests at the island's two nesting caves (Table 1). Numbers today are similar to those reported in the 1987-88 breeding season (Tarburton 1990). As on Aitutaki, extensive rodent-trapping by the Project on 'Atiu found only *Rattus exulans* and *Mus musculus*, suggesting that the island may be free of *R. rattus* (G. McCormack, pers. comm.).

On 13 October 1995 I entered the Tupuranga Cave with Ron Dobbs. On the floor of the cave I found a recently dead swiftlet with a New Zealand band, A-96945. This individual was banded as a chick by M.K. Tarburton on 11 December 1987 as part of his study (Tarburton 1990), so it lived for nearly eight years.

CHATTERING KINGFISHER *Halcyon tuta*

During 14 hours of walking in the southern half of 'Atiu, spread over four days, I saw or heard 10 kingfishers, all in the *makatea* region.

MANGAIA KINGFISHER *Halcyon ruficollaris*

During 15 hours of walking in western and central parts of Mangaia, spread over five days and with at least half the time in or near forest, I noted only two. However, much of my time was in the south-west of the island where kingfisher numbers are lowest (Rowe & Empson 1996).

COOK ISLANDS WARBLER *Acrocephalus karearako*

Common on Mangaia in and about the *makatea* region and in bushy areas of the interior, as reported by Steadman (1985). I counted more than 30 during 15 hours of walking in western and central areas.

RAROTONGA STARLING *Aplonis cinerascens*

In the Auckland Museum collection there are four unsexed specimens of *A. cinerascens* (B3716-9), preserved whole in ethanol, that are labelled as having been collected on Rarotonga by T.F. Cheeseman (1846-1923). Cheeseman visited Rarotonga from May to July 1899 to study the flora (Cheeseman 1903). Two other unlabelled unsexed specimens (B3741-2) have exactly the same colouring and appearance as Cheeseman's specimens and their measurements agree (Table 2). I conclude that they too are *A. cinerascens*, and they may be from the same expedition.

TABLE 2 - Measurements (mm) of six spirit specimens of Rarotonga Starling (*Aplonis cinerascens*) held at Auckland Museum. Bill measurements are from nostril. Ranges of measurements for nine specimens cited by Mayr (1942) and 12 by Holyoak & Thibault (1984) are also given.

	Wing	Tail	Culmen	Bill	Tarsus
B3716	121	73	24.1	16.5	34.0
B3717	118	71	21.4	16.2	31.6
B3718	118	64	23.8	16.0	32.8
B3719	115	65	20.5	15.7	32.9
B3741	116	66	21.4	15.9	33.1
B3742	114	65	22.1	16.0	33.3
Mean	117.0	67.3	22.2	16.1	33.0
S.D.	2.5	3.7	1.4	0.3	0.8
Mayr	118-126	69-77	26	15-16	30-31
Holyoak & Thibault	118-127	69-77	-	-	30-33

There are few specimens of *A. cinerascens* in the world's museums. Hartlaub and Finsch had five when they described the species in 1871, and nine specimens collected in 1903 are held by the Bishop Museum, Honolulu (Holyoak & Thibault 1984). Mayr (1942) had available nine specimens, all from the Rothschild collection. The 1982 world inventory of bird spirit specimens (Wood *et al.* 1982) lists only one specimen which is held by The Natural History Museum, London.

Table 2 gives some measurements of the six Auckland Museum spirit specimens, along with measurements by Mayr (1945) and Holyoak & Thibault (1984), which broadly agree. The latter presumably refer to dry study skins, which should have slightly shorter bills and feet than spirit specimens.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Ron Dobbs for taking me into the Tupuranga Cave on 'Atiu, Janet Anderson of the State Library of New South Wales for information on R. Gosset, Mike Imber for checking the identity of the petrel skin, K.-J. Wilson for unpublished data pertaining to lorikeets on Aitutaki and Gerald McCormack for comments on a draft of this note and for suggesting that I include some data from the Cook Islands Natural Heritage Project.

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KEYWORDS: Cook Islands, Rarotonga, bird distribution, rats

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Manuscript received 1 March 1996

Revision received & accepted 27 June 1996



Red-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon rubricauda* found near Pureora

On 21 April 1996, an adult Red-tailed Tropicbird (*Phaethon rubricauda*) of unknown sex was found by Mr R. Hepi (Department of Conservation), 9.7 km south of Pureora (38° 36' S, 175° 33' E), central North Island. It was on a vehicle track in native forest, and had been dead for 1-2 days. The specimen was submitted to the Museum of New Zealand, Wellington.

The species breeds only on the Kermadec Islands in the New Zealand region, and although the birds disperse widely from their breeding sites in winter, they normally remain over tropical and subtropical waters, well north of New Zealand (Marchant & Higgins 1990). Only seven have been found by Ornithological Society of New Zealand patrollers from 1943 to 1993 while searching more than 111 000 km of beach (Powlesland *et al.* 1992, 1993, Powlesland & Powlesland 1993). In addition, there are 18 other reports of Red-tailed Tropicbirds being found or seen about New Zealand during the period 1877-1988 (Marchant & Higgins 1990). Most of the birds have been seen just offshore or found on beaches. However, three have been found well inland, two near Taupo and one at Lake Okataina near Rotorua (Marchant & Higgins 1990). The recent Pureora bird was 80 km from the nearest coast. Presumably this Red-tailed Tropicbird had been blown inland, since the majority of tropicbirds on New Zealand beaches and inland have been found after northerly gales.

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