

SHORT NOTE

Two unusual tern records from the Chatham Islands

MIKE BELL

DAVE BELL

P.O. Box 14-492, Wellington, New Zealand
wmil@clear.net.nz

During the summer of 1997/98, 2 species of tern not previously confirmed as having been seen at the group were observed at the Chatham Islands, 860 km east of New Zealand. On 12 November 1997, DB saw a New Zealand Antarctic tern (*Sterna vittata bethunei*) in Ocean Bay (43°50'S, 176°50'W), Chatham Island. The bird was observed flying at sea from a fishing boat. The record was accepted as a probable Antarctic tern by the OSNZ Rare Birds Committee (UBR 97/22; D.G. Medway, pers. comm.).

The bird was a medium-sized tern, with an overall grey plumage, both the upper and underwings being uniformly grey. The tail coverts and tail were white. The forehead and crown to the nape were black. A white streak beneath the eye from the gape to the nape contrasted with grey body plumage. The bill and legs were bright red. The similar Arctic tern (*Sterna paradisaea*) could be eliminated because the Chatham bird lacked the pale underwing with a dark, well-defined trailing edge that is characteristic of that species.

The Antarctic tern has a circumpolar distribution (Higgins & Davies 1996). The New Zealand subspecies breed at Stewart Island and outliers, The Snares, and at the Antipodes, Bounty, Auckland, Campbell, and Macquarie Islands (Turbott 1990). The closest breeding site to the Chathams is the Bounty Islands, which lie 400 km south of the Chatham Islands.

This may be the first record of a living Antarctic tern from the Chathams, but subfossil bones attributed to this species or the Arctic tern are not uncommon in dunes on the main island (Turbott 1990), which suggests that Antarctic terns may be regular stragglers to the Chathams.

On 22 January 1998, an immature eastern little tern (*Sterna albifrons sinensis*) was seen at Kawera

Point (43°49'S, 176°28'W), Te Whanga Lagoon, Chatham Island. The bird was seen briefly on 2 other occasions (29 Dec 1997; 17 Jan 1998), but insufficiently well for positive identification. A sighting on 13 February 1998 suggests that what was apparently the same individual remained in the Chathams until at least the middle of February. All sightings were at Kawera Point, where the bird was flying over a short salt meadow, exposed mudflat, and shallow brackish lagoon, that constitute some of the best wader habitats on the island. The record has been accepted by the OSNZ Rare Birds Committee (UBR 39/00; Medway 2001).

This bird was identified as an immature eastern little tern based on its small size, pale grey upperwing with darker outer primaries, a narrow dark leading edge visible as a dark shoulder when roosting, black lores, ear coverts, and nape, and a crown streaked with black fading into a white forehead. The bill was black and the legs were dark brown. The bird was very vocal in flight, giving a chattering 'kik-kik-kik' call. The New Zealand fairy tern (*Sterna nereis davisae*) could be eliminated by the presence on the Chatham bird of darker outer primaries, a fully black bill, the streaked crown, and a different flight call.

Eastern little terns breed in eastern Asia and northern and eastern Australia south to Tasmania (Higgins & Davies 1996). The species is a regular non-breeding summer visitor to New Zealand, where 150-200 individuals arrive in October and November and leave in February to April (Heather & Robertson 1996). Most if not all birds probably come from the eastern Asian population (Turbott 1990).

This is the first record of eastern little tern from the Chatham Islands. Its presence on the island coincides with the known migration schedule for New Zealand, arriving in the Chathams during December and presumably leaving in February. The sighting represents an extension of the non-breeding range for the species.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Geordie Murman (FV *Osprey*) for allowing observations while working and Leo Tuuta for access across his Kawera Point property. Brian D. Bell and Alan Tennyson commented on a draft.

LITERATURE CITED

Heather, B.D.; Robertson, H.A. 1996. *The field guide to the birds of New Zealand*. Auckland, Viking.
Higgins, P.J.; Davies, S.J.J.F. (ed.) 1996. *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic birds, vol. 3, Snipe to pigeons*. Melbourne, Oxford University Press.

Medway, D.G. 2001. Rare Birds Committee – Report for 2000. *Notornis* 48(1): 61-62.

Turbott, E. G. (Convener). 1990. *Checklist of the birds of New Zealand. 3rd ed.* Auckland, Random Century and the Ornithological Society of New Zealand.

Keywords Antarctic tern; *Sterna vittata bethunei*; eastern little tern; *Sterna albifrons sinensis*; Chatham Islands; New Zealand; new records



Notornis, 2002, Vol. 49: 50

0029-4470 © The Ornithological Society of New Zealand, Inc. 2002

SHORT NOTE

Kea (*Nestor notabilis*) make meals of mice (*Mus musculus*)

WAYNE BEGGS

Department of Conservation, P.O. Box 8, Arthur's Pass

SARAH MANKELow

Department of Conservation, Private Bag 4715, Christchurch

Walking down Sudden Valley, Arthur's Pass National Park on 22 October 2000, we stopped to observe a kea (*Nestor notabilis*) perched on a large rock in the riverbed (1400 h, K33 037 069). While we watched, the kea dropped down to the water edge and flew back up to its rocky perch with something in its beak. It then proceeded to consume what was obviously an animal – we thought perhaps a mouse (*Mus musculus*).

Our assumption was confirmed about 1 h later when again we stopped to observe a kea, perhaps the same bird, in the riverbed (1520 h, K33 044 046). It was hopping from rock to rock along the edge of the stream. It then dived between the rocks flapping its wings vigorously. When it hopped back up onto the rocks it had what was unmistakably a wet mouse in its beak. While we watched, the kea held the mouse in its feet, used its beak to skin back the fur, and consumed the mouse.

From these 2 observations, it seems that the opportunistic kea had taken advantage of the high

mouse numbers following a period of high beech (*Nothofagus* spp.) seed fall and turned to active hunting. Higgins (1999: 616-617) refers to several detailed studies listing items observed eaten, including animals; insects, larvae, shearwater chicks and eggs, sheep, and fatty food scraps. Our observations appear to be the first record of small mammals being eaten by kea.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Kerry-Jane Wilson, Lincoln University, for her assistance with this article, and Andy Grant, Department of Conservation, for his advice.

LITERATURE CITED

Higgins, P.J. (ed.) 1999. *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic birds, vol. 4, Parrots to dollarbird*. Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

Keywords kea; *Nestor notabilis*; house mouse; *Mus musculus*; Arthur's Pass National Park