

THE NORTH ISLAND OR WHITE-BREASTED TOMTIT

(*Petroica toitoi*.)—Native Name: Miromiro.

A black beady eye, a jet black glossy head and upper surface a white splash on the wings and tail, a white spot above the bill, a white waistcoat, a boldness akin to impudence, a constant "where is that grub?" attitude—such is the cock North Island tomtit. Where the male is black the female is grey; her breast is greyish white. Also, she is of a much more retiring disposition. The cock bird has a cheery warble of eight notes repeated with little variation at frequent intervals. The hen sings infrequently, and then always in a subdued manner. Both have a penetrating call note, "see," repeated three or four times to keep the pair in touch when hunting for food. The idea of territory is strongly developed in the tomtit, so much so that a pair of birds seem to spend all their lives in the same area and strongly resent the intrusion of another of the species. Although forty years ago the white-breasted tit had become very rare it is now common, not only on the island sanctuaries but also in widely separated areas in the North Island. In some places it is the commonest native bird. The clearings still scattered with charred stumps, and the bush-clad foothills, are favourite summer haunts; in winter, in orchards and gardens, it achieves complete independence of native vegetation.

Towards the end of August the birds prepare to nest. A hole in a tree is a favourite site, or a mossy recess in a bank, or amongst rocks. Sometimes it is found on a shelf on a large bole, at others in the smaller branches of a low tree. Grass, moss, leaf skeletons, spider web, downy seeds, tree-fern scales, and a lining of feathers go to make the cosiest nest in the bush. At this time the sexes are particularly devoted to each other. The female does all the construction work, using material brought by the cock who, in between times, feeds his mate on the choicest of grubs. She is a jealous guardian of the nest and its contents, even feigning lameness or a broken wing to lure the stranger away. Up to four eggs are laid, creamy white and freckled all over with brown specks, thickest near the larger end. Incubation seems to be the prerogative of the female who leaves the nest to be fed when called by the male. When the young are hatched both parents catch food for them. It is then that they frequent paths and clearings in the bush. Occasionally insects are caught on the wing, others are searched for under the bark of trees; but most of the food consists of larvae taken on the ground. The usual attitude is with the wings slightly drooped, the tail erect. Resting for a moment on a branch or tree trunk, a rapid dart is then made