

The Blue Penguin of the Coast

Eudyptula minor (Forster).

Native Name: Korora.

(By R. A. Falla.)

The presence of penguins along the whole coastline of New Zealand seems to be a matter for surprise to some people who associate these birds only with the polar regions. The facts are of course that the penguin family, although confined to the Southern Hemisphere, consists of seventeen species, only two or three of which are inhabitants of the Antarctic ice. Several of them are subantarctic and three species are found in warmer waters. Of these the smallest is the blue penguin of southern and eastern Australia and New Zealand.

In structure it is like its larger relatives, solidly built and muscular, clothed with short flattened feathers which fit almost like a fish's scales. It has very short webbed feet and powerful flippers in place of wings. Thus equipped, the penguin is much at home in the water, swimming easily at the surface and still more rapidly beneath it. Its food consists of small crabs and crab-like creatures as well as fish, and most of its time is spent at sea. The nesting season, beginning in August, brings penguins ashore at various places along the whole coastline of New Zealand from North Cape to Stewart Island.

The birds are not well adapted for progression on land, a fact that is evident by their awkward movements. The very short legs are so restricted in movement as to make their owners definitely "hobbled," and as they are short-sighted and easily flurried they usually flop down on their bellies and progress with the aid of their flippers as well when alarmed.

Various Nesting Places.

Caves and rock cavities are favourite nesting places, but some of the birds, either from choice or necessity, travel some distance from the water to make a burrow either in soft earth or sand. Where a coast is steep the birds will even climb to heights of a hundred feet or so for the purpose. Any human being who erects a seaside house near an ocean

beach is likely to have penguin tenants in the basement.

Perhaps because they are unable to pay rent, the birds make up for it by giving vocal performances at night—father penguin, mother penguin, and the chicks, all braying in different keys. Unappreciative owners have been known to tear up the floor boards in desperation and to eject the tenants without notice.

Two eggs are the full complement for a blue penguin nest, white thick-shelled eggs, not unlike good-sized barn-door hens' eggs. There is usually some grass or other nesting material in which they are partly bedded, and the penguin covers them above by crouching over them. The bird that is not sitting remains at sea all day and returns at night.

The eggs hatch within a day or two of each other, and the chicks are practically twins. They are clothed in short woolly down and are quite helpless except that they are able to hold up their heads for food. Their demands in this direction keep the parents busy, and as the chicks grow bigger both adults spend the day at sea fishing.

Noisy Home-coming.

It is the return of the parents at night that is the occasion for all the noise mentioned previously. The old birds have swallowed the food as they collected it and have the power of regurgitating it in a half-digested condition. This act is stimulated by the chick thrusting its beak up into the old bird's open mouth, and thus receiving its food.

Two successive downy stages in the chicks are followed by the growth of true feathers, and when the last of the second down has dropped off the young birds resemble the old ones, except that they are not so robust and their plumage is of a brighter blue. They swim fairly well as soon as they take to the water, but they seem to have some difficulty in finding food at times, for starving young birds are often washed ashore. Except