

THE WHITE HERON OR KOTUKU

By Douglas G. Middleton.

IT is the parental custom of the Heron family to drive their young away from the locality in which they were reared. This may be a provision of wise Nature to avoid interbreeding. This fact, no doubt, accounts for the recurring appearance of White Herons in various localities. They are seeking to establish new heronries, but are invariably defeated by the man with a gun, who so often thinks every strange bird should be taken to a museum. A Maori belief is that death quickly comes to the person who kills a Kotuku. That noted naturalist, T. H. Potts, in his book "Out in the Open," describes what he noted of the habits of the Kotuku in 1882 as follows:—

"It is a sight for a naturalist to remember, when his eyes fall on a Kotuku, silently standing, with meditative mien, in some shallow pool awaiting its prey, ready for the fatal dart; how quaint is the attitude preserved. Its spotless plumage, thrown into bold relief, perchance, against the backing of a mass of foliage, is mirrored distortedly by the rippling water. Long is the patient watch maintained in stilly silence; to the whole figure the retracted neck gives something of a gloomy air.

"At length the glistening prey glides unwarily within reach of the spear-like bill. One quick stroke, almost too quick for the eye to follow; a slight movement of the neck, the prey is captured and engulfed, and the silent watch is once more resumed.

"When startled by the presence of an unfamiliar object or disturbed by an unusual sound, it shows its uneasiness by erecting the head and moving the long neck sideways in a peering, inquiring manner; this restless motion of the upper part of the body gives quite a comical air to the birds which, if the alarm is continued, launch into flight....

"One gazes with delight on the flight of the Kotuku, on the purity of the plumage, relieved by the spear-like bill and black feet, whilst the movement of the arched wings lends an impression of aerial softness, like the waving of the

delicate feathery fans, such as some gentle spirit might employ to win to forgetfulness of slumber the restless soul of some warrior chief. . . .

"A favourite posture is to stand in the shallow water on one leg, whilst the other is tucked away under the breast feathers.

"Although we have seen it wade to a considerable depth at times, its livelihood is gained by watching and waiting by the shore.

"It is not always solitary. Two or sometimes three, still more rarely several. Herons may be observed fishing in close neighbourhood to each other, particularly if eels abound. Half an hour may elapse before they move their quarters, or even a single bird changes its station for one more promising."

When Mr. Potts visited the heronry at Okarito, on the West Coast, in December, 1871, he found that the birds were in sadly diminished numbers. He described his visit as follows:—

"We arrived at the breeding station and found it three miles from the sea on a stream called the Wai-tangi-tuna, from its waters abounding with eels. . . . On the still air came a rushing noise of wings, now high above. Around us flew scores of small black shags and many a noble Heron in high alarm, crossing the stream or following its windings, soaring over the tree tops, or gliding past the deep shadows.

"In company with many scores of sombre-plumaged shags, we could see numerous white-robed Herons as they brooded over or shuffled from their nests, prepared for flight, took wing, glided aloft, settled on tree tops or prepared to alight. . . .

"In one instance a Heron's nest occupied the top of a tree fern, with the bird crouched over her charge, the white plumage showing, through the spreading fronds. The nests were firmly, if coarsely, built of sticks well interlaced till a strong platform had been formed some seventeen inches in diameter.

"The Kotuku commences laying about the