

WILD LIFE IN THE SUB- ANTARCTIC

(Written for "The Listener" by
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HAVING been invited by *The Listener* to write a series of articles on the wild life in the sub-antarctic region of New Zealand I find it necessary to define the zone in which my studies were made. Actually this area would take in all that area of ocean from the Snares south of Stewart Island to Macquarie Island and eastwards to the Bounties and Antipodes and include those islands as well as the Aucklands and Campbells. But the Macquaries are controlled by Australia and the Bounties and Antipodes are outside the area in which I was stationed in the war years. So, unless otherwise stated, the sub-antarctic zone in this and succeeding articles will refer to the Snares, Auckland, and Campbell Islands only.

To most people these islands probably mean sealskins and slaughter and vast quantities of seal oil—activities which almost completely exterminated these quaint mammals. However, the establishment of depots for castaways, visits by Government ships to replenish these, the liberation of various animals to provide food for shipwrecked mariners, and attempts at settlement on these islands have led to a vast change from the primeval conditions which prevailed before their discovery. Indeed, so rapid has been the decline of the flora so unused to browsing animals, of the seals so ruthlessly hunted, and of the birds so free of the fear of man, that it is hard now to imagine what the islands looked like originally.

Scientific Investigation

Fortunately, some enthusiastic and able investigators have left records showing what the flora and fauna were really like. Then, too, many of the beautiful birds of the region nest in places untroubled by the introduced animals, while the rugged nature of the islands has allowed most, if not all, of the indigenous plants to survive.

But scientific investigations in the past had to be limited to a matter of days if only on the score of expense; and it was only when the islands were occupied as a wartime safety measure that the opportunity was offered to New Zealand scientists to live for lengthy periods on comparatively little known groups. Better still, they were enabled to see and record the whole cycle of the plant and animal life with its seasonal changes and variations. Mistakes of the past have been corrected, fresh observations have been made, and detailed life histories of many of the species worked out.

And so at least one scientist was included in each coast-watching party in the sub-antarctic. Their scientific work had, of course, to be secondary to the main job of watching for enemy activity and the irksome but necessary camp chores. But, as there was a fair amount of spare time and, in the summer, very



Above: The author with a young albatross rescued from scrub in which it had crashed on its first flight from the nest

Right: *Pleurophyllum speciosum*, a plant closely related to the New Zealand mountain daisies, growing on Campbell Island

long hours of daylight, the field work provided a very useful outlet for the energy of men "fighting fit." Few, indeed, of the men took no interest in the creatures and plants with which they were surrounded. Almost all were keen to utilise any fine day when they were off duty in doing field work of some kind. When the whole scientific records of the "Cape Expedition" are written they will greatly increase our knowledge of the region.

"Fairchild's Garden"

A visit to Adam's Island, separated from the main Auckland Island by the turbulent Carnley Harbour, gave me the chance of seeing what the original native plants and animals looked like, for, on this island neither cattle, sheep, pigs, goats, cats, rabbits, nor rats have managed to gain a footing. At "Fairchild's Garden," near the Western Entrance to Carnley Harbour, I saw the luxuriant growth of many species of plants which are not found outside the Auckland and Campbell Islands. Unfortunately these beautiful plants have no common names and a description, however well written, leaves much to be desired. Acres of glossy green-leaved *Bulbinella* with golden flower-heads reaching two feet in height, great clumps of mauve-coloured *Anisotome*, and the three magnificent species of *Pleurophyllum* made an unforgettable sight. These latter plants seem out of place in such regions, particularly the one named "speciosum." One plant had leaves that when expanded measured three feet across, and

