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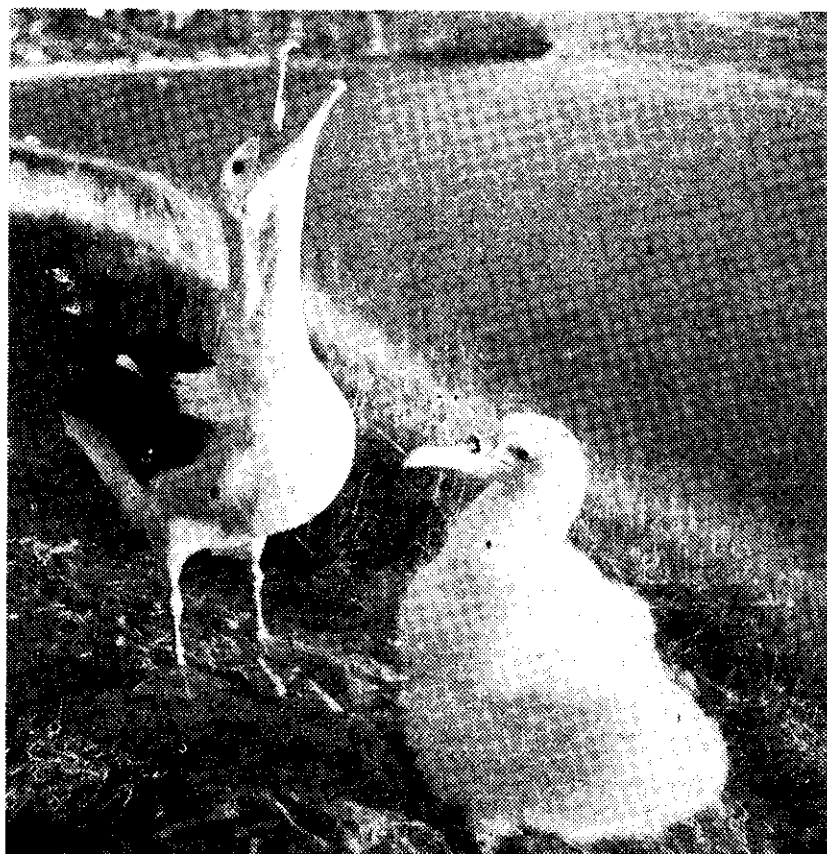
# OTAGO'S ROYAL ALBATROSSES

Written for "The Listener" by  
L. E. RICHDALE

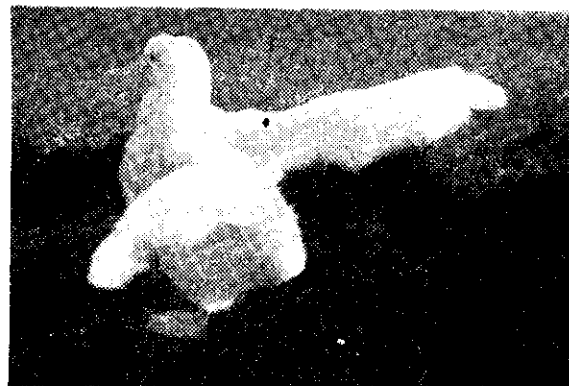
AS far as I have been able to discover from the evidence available, the female of the first mated pair of royal albatrosses to lay at Taiaroa Head on the Otago Peninsula did so in 1920. The egg was promptly confiscated by a near-by resident, who explained to me many years later that if he had not taken the egg "the other fellows would have." The shell of that egg lies to-day in the Otago Museum. Since 1920, human interference has dogged the attempts of the birds to hatch a chick, and year after year until 1935, there was keen competition for the eggs. In that year, however, for some strange reason, nobody wanted the egg, and a baby albatross was actually allowed to hatch; unfortunately the little creature, when only six weeks old, was killed, allegedly by a stoat. It was late in 1936 when I paid my first visit to Taiaroa Head, and there, on a grassy path before my astonished gaze, sat a father albatross, and beneath him a large, white egg. That egg, too, was stolen.

In 1937, the birds again laid and I was determined on this occasion to do all in my power to prevent a repetition of the previous loss. Keeping a close vigil, I almost literally lived alongside the nest, making a special point of being present all day every Saturday and Sunday. At this juncture, the Otago Branch of the Royal Society was asked for assistance, which was readily forthcoming. The first fence was built. On September 27, 1938, our efforts were rewarded when the first baby albatross flew from Taiaroa Head.

THE news of the event quickly spread and people soon found means of evading the obstacle created by the fence and gaining unauthorised admission to the area. Something more was necessary. I next turned to the Harbour Board, which administered the area where the albatrosses were endeavouring to establish a colony, and well I remember meeting the executive officers.



★  
ABOVE: The father albatross "singing" to baby before feeding him. RIGHT: Trying his wings—the baby albatross at its most attractive stage.  
★



After considerable discussion, the late J. McGregor Wilkie, Harbour Board Engineer, turned to me and said, "Well, what would you like?" "A second fence," I replied. "Right," said Mr. Wilkie. And the fence was erected. From that day until he died recently, Mr. Wilkie was a staunch champion of the albatrosses and, in my opinion, no one has been more influential in preserving the birds to the extent to which they are preserved to-day.

The war came, and in the first year of the area's occupation by the army, no fewer than five baby albatrosses were reared—a splendid achievement. But the ending of the war was followed by the period of greatest loss since 1935, culminating (at the end of January, 1949) in the destruction of two chicks as they were hatching.

SINCE 1935, 44 eggs have been laid, and from that number only 15 chicks have been reared. According to my observations, only four of the losses have been due to natural causes. These facts speak for themselves and do not make a happy picture. Moreover, a point that is rarely realised is that the losses have not been due to vandalism in spite of what has been published to the contrary.

The losses have been caused by unconscious destruction by well-intentioned but curious people and by people who can see no reason why they should not be admitted to the area. One example may help to explain the situation. In 1946, two females each laid an egg, and other non-breeding birds were in the area in preparation for breeding in later seasons. Sheep were also grazing inside the sanctuary. The constant presence of people unlawfully entering the sanctuary agitated the sheep which, becoming more and more frightened, eventually stampeded over the nests and smashed the eggs. More devastating still, under such conditions, the non-breeding birds found the place untenable. Some congregated on the water, but two others, a male and a female, sought privacy in a quiet area some 500 yards outside the sanctuary. Here, in 1947, the female became entangled in a mass of barbed-wire placed on the ground for defence purposes and had to be killed. That female happened to be the first chick reared at Taiaroa to return to her place of hatching. And what a return! Tragedy overtook her because of the unconscious action of certain people entering the sanctuary without authority. The death

(continued on next page)

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