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The Family Life of the Royal Albatross

IN a previous article on the Royal Albatross, I tried to give some idea of the problems besetting those who were trying to make it possible for the albatrosses to survive on Otago Peninsula. Doubtless, many people would like to know something of the family affairs of these most interesting birds.

In 1937, when I began to study the birds in earnest, little of an authentic nature was known of the Royal Albatross; therefore a most interesting field lay before me. The first task was to band the birds in order that each one would be known as an individual. This operation was successfully carried out without handling the birds, so that there was no risk of their deserting the area. The method of banding was to lie down alongside the bird and gradually affix the band. The whole procedure might take half an hour, but I always feel that it is the duty of a worker among birds (even a photographer) to make sure that the interests of the birds do not suffer.

In the month or so before the single egg is laid, the female is seldom ashore; the male is the bird most frequently at the nest. On The Snares Islands this same procedure is adopted by Buller's Mollmawk. Space, however, does not permit me to analyse this interesting aspect of behaviour. Shortly after the egg

is laid, and generally on the same day, the male Albatross takes charge of the egg and the female goes off to sea. The egg, which is white and about the size of a pound of butter, is laid in a nest on the ground. Both birds take turns at incubation, but within my experience the length of the turns varies considerably from one to 14 days. No food is taken by the incubating bird until after it is relieved by its mate.

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

In Buller's Mollmawk, one partner, which I was watching, incubated without relief and without

out food for 24 consecutive days. The Laysan Albatross on Midway Island in the North Pacific Ocean has been known to incubate without relief for 18 days; the performance of the Royal Albatross is therefore not unique.

The total period of incubation—a lengthy one—which was unknown previously, proved to vary from 78 to 80 days. This span, as far as I know, is the longest for any bird in the world. The Kiwi is a close second, taking from 75 to 78 days according to reports received in the south. It is indeed remarkable that New Zealand should possess both records.

With the hatching of the chick, an interesting stage in the breeding cycle of the Albatrosses is opened. Destined to remain ashore for approximately seven and a-half months before being capable of flying, the chick is fed by both parents by a process of regurgitation. For the first three months the chick is a most beautiful ball of thick white

down, broken only by its jet black eye. After that, the black feathers of the wings begin to show through the white down, and the young bird slowly assumes adult appearance. Taking turn about, the parent birds guard the chick until it is four to six weeks old, but after that it is left alone at the nest while both parents fish. The chick is fed approximately twice a week for the first three months, once by each parent. There is, however, considerable variation in methods by individual pairs of birds in most proceedings, so that it is difficult to make hard and fast rules.

The most spectacular discovery that came from my watching the Albatrosses was the explosion of what is known as the starvation theory. There was a belief, expressed freely in the press of 1938, that when the chick was three or four months old it was deserted for ever by its parents and thereafter lived entirely without further food, subsisting on its fat until after it flew and found food for



MALE ALBATROSS AND EGG
A photograph taken at Taiaroa Head