

The Sub-Antarctic

WILD LIFE ON AN ISLAND OUTPOST

ON latitude 48 degrees and longitude 166 degrees 35 minutes E, just 64 miles south-west of the nearest point of land in southern New Zealand, are the sub-Antarctic islands known as The Snares. The group consists of two main islands; one much larger than the other, and a number of storm-swept rocks. The larger of the two main islands is the one on which a companion and I studied the plant and animal life from January 9 to February 26, 1948.

When approaching from the sea, one receives the impression that this main island consists of high cliffs, with the land beyond covered by vegetation. The cliffs are approximately 400 feet high and in most places are sheer to the sea. In the middle of the eastern side, however, the land slopes gradually to the water's edge, so that it is possible to land and set up camp. The area of the island is probably between 400 and 500 acres; it is roughly triangular in shape, with the greatest length about 1¼ miles and the width about one mile.

The islands were first discovered in 1791 when Captain Vancouver, in charge of the *Discovery*, unexpectedly sighted what he described as "a cluster of seven craggy islets." From 1810-1817, The Snares were a refuge and a home for four unfortunate sealers. These men belonged to a sealing gang on the schooner *Adventure*, the captain of which ran short of provisions. He offered the men the choice of starving afloat or taking their chance of survival on the inhospitable Snares. They chose the latter.

On most of the islands to the south of New Zealand, the Government had erected huts and supplied them with provisions to be used by castaways landing from wrecked ships. These huts were visited twice annually for many years up to 1928, when the service was discontinued, largely because ships were using a more northerly course and because wireless had become universal. The Snares had a hut allegedly built in 1873. Shaped in the form of a lean-to, the hut was about 15 feet long, eight feet wide, and six feet high on the higher wall. There was no window or fireplace and the door was not on hinges. The roof and the walls were of iron with a wooden frame-work.

Although we had brought with us a tent, we soon found that the constant rain and the strong winds made the use of it impracticable. We were therefore obliged to begin repair work on the very dilapidated hut. Fortunately, we had brought iron with us for this purpose. In the repaired hut we lived and worked for nearly seven weeks.

The flora of the island was unique and remarkable. Covering probably over 300 acres in the centre is a forest in which thrives practically only one kind of tree—an *Olearia* which is found nowhere else in the world except on a portion of the Auckland islands farther south. On this forest floor, because of the close canopy of leaves overhead, nothing

grows except where the wind has blown down a tree and the light has penetrated. Here and there, largely on the forest edge, grow two other woody plants.

Around the edges of the forest and between the trees and the cliffs are extensive meadows. The grass of these meadows grows like cocksfoot and is called *Tataki* grass by the Maoris, who once used it for thatching huts on the mutton-bird islands. On the cliff edges and on any rocky outcrops grows a tussock which is also a grass. In addition there is a strange pumpkin-like plant called *Punui* by the Maoris. Growing up on long hollow stalks, often five feet high, the *Punui* has circular leaves on top up to 18 inches in diameter. Altogether, The Snares are supposed to possess 26 species of plants, but we saw only 10—an indication that the remainder are extremely rare.

In addition to the flora, The Snares are also remarkable for seals and birds. Of the seals there were three kinds present—the sea elephant, the sea lion, and the fur seal. The sea elephant population was a small one, for there could not have been more than 10 individuals altogether. As a rule they were domiciled in the forest some 200 yards from our hut. One old fellow, however, was not allowed to join the group, and he took up residence a few yards from us. The poor creature gained a certain

amount of sympathy, for he was badly scarred, bearing on his body marks of ancient struggles and

also of more recent conflicts.

Sea lions were more numerous; there were about 100 members. These monsters used to land near by and enter the bush, through which some would go fully half a mile. New Zealanders are told that they have no native wild mammals in their forest, so that it gave me a weird feeling to meet these animals lying down in many places under the trees. We had to be careful, too, not to bump into the beasts unexpectedly, for an attack was always possible.

The third sea mammal—the fur seal—was the commonest of all; about 200 of them were present. These animals did not enter the forest and were always found lying about on the rocks close to the water. At the sight of us they took one look, opened their mouths and snarled, and then made straight for the water. In contrast with the sea lions, they were very timid.

Of the land birds only three—black tomtit, fernbird and bush snipe—were in any numbers. There were in addition a few English birds and some wax-eyes. The tomtit was unique in that each sex was black all over and was confined only to The Snares. Tomtits elsewhere are



"One old sea elephant took up residence a few yards from us"

quite a different colour. The commonest land bird was the fernbird, which is brown and speckled all over, and much smaller than an English thrush. It was very tame and would enter the hut through the doorway and make its exit through one of the many gaps in the iron. One used to sit on the toe of my boot. My favourite bush bird, however, was the bush snipe. In general appearance he resembles a miniature kiwi for he has a long bill, and in size and colour, though not so speckled, is like a thrush. Rarely does he fly, although he will do so if sufficiently alarmed. His food is gathered by probing the soft earth with his long bill.

Of the sea birds the most interesting were the penguins, mutton-birds, and mollymawks. The penguins existed in many thousands. Leaving the sea along the rocky eastern shores, they would climb a slope—in some places quite steep—to the forest beyond. Here they advanced sometimes as far as half a mile, climbing to heights of fully 400 feet. A feature of interest was that they did not make one large colony, but had many small ones scattered over fully half of the island.

As the evening light began to fall, the sky in all directions became literally full of mutton-birds returning to their island home. They milled about in all directions and created a sight which must be seen to be appreciated. The nightly landfall of countless mutton-birds and other petrels is an experience of a lifetime and witnessed by only a few of the human race. My estimate of the number of mutton-birds on The Snares is approximately 700,000.

Finally there were the lovely and majestic mollymawks. These birds nest along almost the entire coastline of the island in small groups on the cliffs and in the forest. Their nests are indeed quaint, being shaped like a cheese about 10 inches high on which the birds sit. Only one large egg is laid, and male and female take turns at incubating. When we left the island the eggs had not hatched.

It is to be hoped that the remarkable plants, mammals, and birds of these islands will be preserved. The Snares form probably the only area of any size left in New Zealand where the flora and fauna are still in their virgin state. The white man's pests—so far—have not gained a footing.

The SHELL NEWS COLUMN

Increase in world consumption of petroleum has caused an intensive search for oil. No area, however remote, is free from the persistent efforts of Shell explorers. Often the only way to gain access to a likely region is by air, and in some cases, men, material and supplies have been parachuted in. Surveys have been carried out in places as far apart as Venezuela, British Borneo, Nigeria, Queensland, Egypt and New Brunswick.

Before drilling commences, it must be ascertained whether oil is likely to be present. This is the job of the Geologist, for oil deposits usually occur in certain earth formations. The appearance of the surface is an indication of the sub-strata, so aerial surveys play a large part in exploration. Close inspection of the aerial photographs follows, and if the area appears likely, the second stage is begun.



Geophysicists—"earth scientists"—visit the area and take "soundings", that is, set off sound waves which are reflected by the various sub-strata and are recorded on various delicate instruments on the surface. This reveals the earth formation, and the possible presence of oil.

Even more hazardous are marine surveys, which have been undertaken with success on the coasts of Egypt, Venezuela, Trinidad and Louisiana. A scientist is lowered into the water in a diving bell containing delicate remote-control instruments for taking "soundings". The difficulty is, however, that the scientist is working "blind". Everything depends on the instruments and the conclusions reached by the expert.

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