

THE ISLAND OF BIRDS

Written for "The Listener" by
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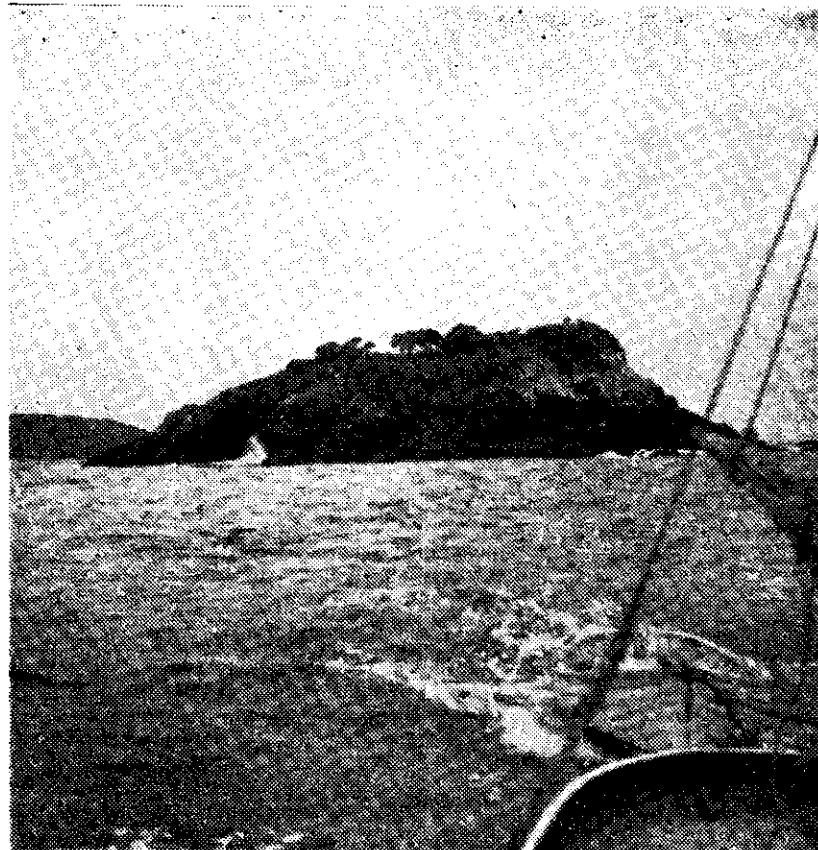
TWO days after writing this article I shall leave for Whero Island, where I hope to remain for some three months in order to continue my study of five species of petrels which inhabit the place. By the time the article is published the initial stages of the work will be completed.

In January, 1937, after having spent a month at Port Pegasus, I was cruising off the entrance of Paterson Inlet with R. H. Traill, who suddenly pointed to a small island some three miles away and said, "There are birds on that island." These words were destined to have a momentous effect on my study of bird life, which in January, 1937, was only in its first season. In late December, 1938, I spent a week on Bench Island with a companion. On our return we had to pass Whero Island, and it was then that Mr. Traill's words spoken nearly two years earlier were recalled. Accordingly, I asked the launchman if he would land us on Whero Island, but he was most reluctant on account of the danger.

After further persuasion, however, he agreed to land us, but only for an hour. That proved to be one of the most glorious hours of my life. Even although Whero is very tiny (one can throw a stone across it lengthwise) I saw little of the island in that hour. During the period ashore, I remained on the north end of the island, and was constantly dive-bombed by a pair of skuas. Since then, skuas have often attacked me, but the thrill has never been the same. First experiences seem ever the best.

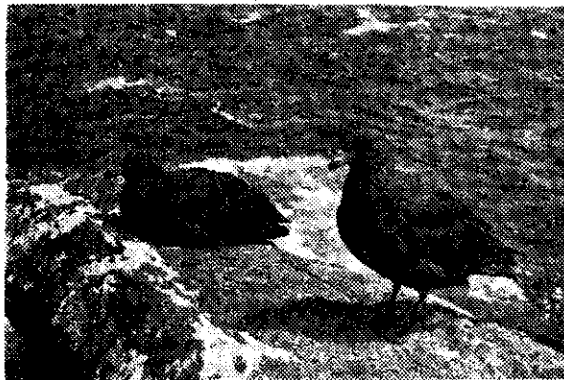
On our return to Halfmoon Bay the thoughts of Whero dominated everything else, and after collecting a few supplies we returned to the little island for a camp of 10 days. That, too, was a wonderful experience and enabled me to make plans for the future. Two years later, in December, 1940, my serious work on the petrels of Whero Island began and continued for five consecutive seasons. In all, 42 weeks were spent on the island, one visit lasting as long as three months. This year, after a lapse of five years, I am looking forward with great interest to the results. Special efforts will be made to discover to what extent young birds have returned to their place of hatching and how long the various pairs have remained married. If some of the 1940-1941 birds are still paired it means they have been married for at least 10 years. Some indication of the age to which these birds live will also be noted.

PETRELS are seabirds which have their nostrils in the form of tubes on the top of the bill. All have webbed feet and, as far as I know, all lay one egg to the clutch. There are nearly 100 species which range in size from the tiny storm petrel of some two ounces to the giant albatross approximately 20 pounds in weight. The petrels inhabiting Whero Island are the parara or broad-billed prion, the titi wainui or narrow-billed prion, the kuaka or diving



ABOVE: Whero Island

RIGHT: Skua chicks, fully fledged



petrel, the white-faced storm petrel, and the mutton-bird. All nest in burrows in the ground, all return to the island at dusk or later, and all leave again either at daybreak or earlier.

The monarchs of the island are skuas, or sea hawks, or sea hens as they are sometimes called. There are only two of them, for they allow none of their kind to approach. Nesting on the island, they usually rear two young. A skua is a kind of gull and, in appearance, resembles the yearling of the big black-backed gull. Skuas are scavengers, but they also attack and eat any stray small petrel which may come their way. Very wisely, the petrels avoid the island by day or, if ashore, are safely tucked away inside their burrows.

As night approaches the scene dramatically changes. The quietness of day is disturbed by the noisy calls of the arriving inhabitants. Off-shore mutton-birds collect on the water, and before it is properly dark begin to circle the island. Gradually they land and scuttle away to their burrows under the vegetation. Once darkness has shrouded the island and the skua can no longer see,

in come the titi wainuis and the pararas some time after 10 p.m. in mid-summer. These are quickly followed by the kuakas, but it is not until 11 p.m. that the tiny storm petrels appear. The noise and activity created by these 3,000 night inhabitants all crowded into one half acre of land is impossible for me to describe. Pandemonium is let loose. Sleep for the uninitiated is out of the question; fortunately, in the early stages, I did not want to sleep. Events occurring all night long were too interesting. The storm petrels' sojourn on land is brief, and by 2.30 a.m. they begin to depart. By 3 a.m. the titi wainuis, pararas, and diving petrels have gone, and by 4.30 a.m. the last of the mutton-birds take a final farewell. Meanwhile, the skuas have awakened and once more start roaming the island in case any unwary petrel attempts a late departure.

CORRECTION: In "The Listener" of January 6, the captions for photographs of Sir Henry Dale and Professor Ronald Syme, printed on page 6, were inadvertently transposed.



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