

THE WHITE-FRONTED TERN

By "CAFFE" with wood engravings by MERVYN TAYLOR

TO YACHTSMEN and fishermen, the "kahawai bird," or to give the name by which it is known in books, the White-fronted Tern, is a well-known companion of many a sun-drenched day on sparkling summer seas. Terns are relations of the gulls, of more streamlined build, feeding on surface fish rather than scavenging, and obtaining their food by dipping into the water from the air instead of swimming on the surface of the water.

The commonest New Zealand tern is the subject of this article, and is distinguished from others of his kind in this country by the band of white feathers separating the neat black cap (which most terns wear) from the bill, which is black and not red or brown as in other New Zealand terns. Let us try to follow the tern throughout the months of the year.

In September and October kahawai birds resort to small rocky islets off the coast or, at times, to shingle and sand bars at the mouths of estuaries to nest. Such breeding colonies are found from the Three Kings Islands in the far north to the outlying Chatham and Auckland Islands to the east and south. Deserted coal hulks and barges in the Auckland Harbour are other nesting places, safe from the ravages of cats and rats if sometimes within the range of marauding school-boys.

Little or no nest is built, and the time of preparation for the arrival of eggs is spent in elaborate courtship rites. The newly moulted terns have developed long "streamer" feathers margining the tail, which takes on a most exaggerated swallow-like appearance. The male catches a small fish, pilchard, or sprat, and, with this in his bill, bows at his mate, mockingly offers it to her, and struts around her, interspersing, no doubt, well-chosen words in the somewhat unmelodious vocabulary of the terns.

One, two, or three eggs are laid on the surface of rock or sand with little semblance of a nest. They are brown with a great variety of purplish-black blotches and pencillings and are noticeably pear-shaped.

When nesting is in full swing a visit to a tern colony is an experience never to be forgotten. Sparkling white birds hurl themselves at one with the tactics of a dive bomber; others stand guard by their eggs and cry defiance at the intruder; chicks scuttle like rats over the guano-whitened surface of the rocks, or huddle in a crannie, where their mottled down renders them almost invisible. It is sometimes difficult, in the confusion, not to tread on eggs.

Throughout the summer months when the parents are collecting food for chicks, they may be seen at sea making

