Observations on Birds of the Antarctic

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While browsing among the articles in the first volume of the *Tasmanian Journal of Natural Science*, 1842, I came across a paper by Robert McCormick, who was surgeon of H.M.S. Erebus in Ross and Crozier's Antarctic Expedition of 1840-1. As Hobart was the base-town of the expedition, and McCormick's observations were contributed directly to the *Tasmanian Journal*, his remarks may have some interest to readers of *The Emu*. Those passages are selected which seem best worthy of reproduction.

"After our departure from the Derwent in November, 1840, the first places visited were Auckland and Campbell Islands, both of volcanic formation, chiefly basalt and greenstone, assuming frequently the columnar form, in some places displaying fine pillars, highly magnetic. The birds are all New Zealand species, from which country Auckland Island has, most unquestionably, been colonised by the feathered tribe. The land-birds are very limited in number, and do not amount to more than seven or eight species; a *Falco*, *Anthus*, *Psittacus*, and four or five species allied to *Meliphagidæ*, of which the New Zealand Tui and a small olive-green bird are the chief choristers of the woods. [The latter was probably the Bell-Bird, *Anthornis melanura*.—H.S.D.] In Campbell Island I did not meet with a single land-bird, which is rather extraordinary, as the island, although much less wooded than Auckland, nevertheless has several of its valleys thickly clothed with underwood. The water-birds consist of a New Zealand species of duck, a species of *Phalacrocorax*, a *Scolapax*, an *Aptenodytes*, and two species of *Larus* (the black-backed and small ash-backed gulls), frequenting the bays in abundance.

"The Albatross (*Diomedia exulans*) was breeding in both islands in vast numbers, and at the season of incubation (November and December) is so unwilling to take wing that it may easily be caught with the hand. In pairing, they assemble in groups. I have counted as many as thirteen birds collected on the side a hill, going through various grotesque movements of the head and neck, bringing their beaks in conjunction, and this wooing lasts until each bird has selected its future mate, when the construction of the nest begins, in which both male and female take a share.

"The nest consists of a mound of soil, intermingled with withered grass and leaves matted together, 18 inches in height, six feet in circumference at the base, and 27 inches in diameter at the top. The Albatross, like most of the

Petrel tribe, lays only one egg, of a white colour, averaging about 17 oz. in weight, which the bird resolutely defends, snapping the mandibles of its beak together sharply when forced by an intruder from its nest, in which it is most frequently found sleeping, with its head behind its wing.

"After an examination of certainly more than 100 nests, I only once found two eggs in the same nest. The Albatross's greatest enemy is a fierce raptorial species of Gull, of a brown colour, having one toe on each foot armed with a strong curved claw, and very much resembling the *Lestris parasiticus* or Arctic Gull, in its predatory habits and general aspect. It has a range from Kerguelen's Land, where I first met it, to 78° South. This bird is ever on the watch for the Albatross quitting its nest, when it instantly pounces down on the egg, which I have seen it break and commence devouring with the greatest impudence, when I have been not more than a few paces from the nest. So well is the Albatross aware of its enemy, that it snaps its beak in defiance whenever it observes this marauder flying over its nest. It appears to be an undescribed species. [Antarctic Skua, *Megalestris antarctica*, Less.—H.S.D.] Four or five kinds of Petrel were breeding underground in the holes of the cliffs overhanging the bay.

"The oceanic birds met with after leaving Campbell Island were Albatrosses, Petrels and Penguins; of the former (sic) three kinds—*Diomedia fuliginosa, D. exulans*, and a smaller black-backed one. Of the Petrels, *Procellaria gigantea, P. capensis, P. pelagica*, and about six other species, with now and then a raptorial Gull.

"On crossing the Antarctic Circle, the White Petrel—the most beautiful of its kind—was first seen, and continued with us as far south as the Barrier, in 78° latitude, again leaving us on our return to the northward of the circle, so that it would appear that its geographical range is limited to within the Antarctic Circle—at least, during the summer season in these regions. Its food consists of small fishes and shrimps, in search of which it gracefully skims the surface of the sea, now and then directing its course round the ship.

"On 12th January, 1841, I made a hasty examination of a small island, the only spot I had an opportunity of landing upon, lying a little to the eastward of the 'main' land, in lat. 71° 56′ S., long. 191° 7′ E.—a basaltic rock rising to the height of 300 feet in places. From this a platform extended to the ice-girt landing-place, on which the Penguins had established a rookery, and were congregated in such countless numbers, young and old, that the whole place, with the ice and water adjacent, seemed alive with them. The spot on which they were breeding, from its elastic and

spongy feel, was evidently the product of annual accumulations of their excrement, forming a tolerably thick covering to the rocks. Many of the birds appeared as if their breasts were stained with blood, which, on examination, was found to arise from a red coloring matter in the excrement on which they had been resting their breasts." On 28th January the magnificent volcano, Mt. Erebus, was sighted, and named after the ship; also the extinct Mt. Terror; progress south was here checked by a great ice-barrier, 150 feet and upwards in height, which was traced for 300 miles without any sign of a termination. Soundings were obtained within less than a mile of it. in 318 fathoms, on a bottom of green mud. The White Petrel seemed to have chosen this as its favorite haunt, with only an occasional raptorial Gull to intrude upon its icy domain. Whales were spouting in all directions, and many seals and Penguins were seen on the ice.

"On 7th April we anchored in the Derwent, after an absence of five months."

The *Tasmanian Journal,* from which the above observations were taken, is now rather scarce, only three volumes (1842-6-9) having been issued; these are full of most interesting papers by various naturalists and travellers. The 1842 volume contains Rev. J. T. Ewing's list of Tasmanian Birds—the first one compiled of our island avifauna—with remarks on some of the species. Ewing also reviewed Gould's *Birds of Australia,* which was then being published; in the 1846 *Journal* Rev. Wm. Colenso gives an account of his journey through the North Island of New Zealand, with remarks on the birds, insects, and plants encountered on the way.

Roosting of Starlings.—All are familiar with the gregarious habits of the introduced Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), and have seen their flocks, often of some hundreds, wheeling in the air, at times becoming almost invisible as they turn in the sun's rays, then changing through silver to a dense black mass as they come into a more favourable light. At Beaconsfield, Vic., last spring, I was camped one night on a V-shaped lagoon about a mile and a half in circumference, but nowhere, except at the apex, more than say 150 feet across. There, however, the water spread over a large expanse and clumps of reeds grew in profusion. Some of these were growing around small tea-tree covered islets. Just at dusk a noise like a heavy downpour of rain coming from the centre of the lagoon induced me to creep to the margin of the pond and peer through the tea-tree across the water. It was nearly dark, but there could dimly be seen thousands of Starlings with hundreds more arriving every few seconds—evidently the whole population