

## Winter Abundance of Birds in Port Phillip Bay

By ROY WHEELER, Windsor, Vic.

Fishermen have rarely seen such quantities of whitebait as appeared in Port Phillip Bay during the winter of 1946. In parts of the shallows, from six to eight feet deep, the sea-bed could not be seen for the swarms of these fish passing through the water. The main masses seemed to pass close to the shore from Frankston to Beaumaris and then across to Port Melbourne and Hobson's Bay. Such masses of food attracted shoals of other fish, as well as thousands of sea-birds, and watchers from the beaches were daily treated with the rare sight of hundreds of Gannets and terns taking their fill close to the shore. In June, July and August, I was at Mentone and Mordialloc, bayside suburbs 13 and 15 miles respectively from Melbourne, and was able to note daily this great influx of birds.

Soon after sunrise each morning Gannets (*Sula serrator*) were seen off Mordialloc coming up the bay in 'follow the leader' fashion, making mostly for their favourite fishing grounds off Beaumaris. Beaumaris, by the way, seemed to be one of the localities where food was in abundance most of the time, and a day rarely passed without Gannets being seen in that vicinity. The Gannets came up the bay at the height of 200 to 300 feet and, on nearing the shallow water, they dropped to within 50 or 60 feet. The early morning sun glinting on their pure white plumage and the black wing tips made a very striking sight.

If food was about near the Mordialloc or Parkdale beaches, the birds invariably took their toll, as they 'peeled off' and hit the water one after the other with their effortless diving. But mostly they passed on, up to a dozen birds following each other—up, then down, gradually passing out of view. Then another party would follow on the same route. My best view of the Gannets was on a calm evening, just before dark on July 12, when, in a little cove off Beach Road, Mentone, I watched a huge flock of Gannets diving into the smoothest of seas. It was a beautiful sight, with as many as eight birds hitting the water simultaneously. They dived with partially closed wings, some vertically, others diagonally, but each dive was made perfectly and without any effort. There followed a short spell after coming to the surface, a leisurely take-off, a short wheeling flight and then another dive, the spray rising feet into the air as each bird hit the water. I noticed one bird that had apparently hit the sea bottom during its dive, for when it took off it flew along breasting the water for some distance as though washing the mud from its feathers.

The Gannet does not fish only in smooth water, however. On the afternoon of July 19 a 50-mile-an-hour gale was blowing and the Bay was a heaving mass of 'white horses'. Against the grey background of a leaden sky, the flash of the diving Gannets could be seen out in the Bay. The splashes of the Gannets diving were like shrapnel falling amongst the wind-tossed waves. The birds were still diving at dusk, only the splashes telling that the birds were still feeding in their steady fashion. Other excellent views of a great flock feeding were at Beaumaris, Port Melbourne and in Hobson's Bay.

During the same period hundreds of Crested Terns (*Sterna bergii*) patrolled up and down the Bay shores, taking their share of the spoils. Crested Terns are always present in small numbers along the various beaches, but at Mordialloc and Mentone, during June and July of 1946, up to 40 or 50 birds could be seen all through the day fishing close to the shore. With their long wings beating against the breeze, head bent and the bill poised ready for that quick dive, they missed nothing that came their way. Wherever the Gannets were fishing, Crested Terns were noted on the fringe of the large flock as though picking up the 'crumbs' that escaped the larger birds. Dozens of Crested Terns were also noted at times off Brighton and at Fishermen's Bend.

On a calm foggy morning near the end of June, 1946, the puppy-like bark of the Fairy Penguin (*Eudyptula minor*) came floating in on the breeze. Later, when the fog lifted, they could be seen, five parties of about twelve in each, swimming and diving near the shore at Parkdale (between Mordialloc and Mentone). They remained in this vicinity for several days. No doubt the abundance of food was the attraction. Penguins were also noted at Beaumaris.

Both Hoary-headed Grebes (*Podiceps poliocephalus*) and Musk Ducks (*Biziura lobata*) were noted off Mordialloc and Mentone during the winter of 1946. A fisherman told me that, returning in his boat early one morning, he ran into a large flock of Hoary-headed Grebes (?) about a mile out from the shore, off Parkdale. Most of the birds took flight—a great sight as hundreds of them flapped along the surface of the Bay. He had never before seen such a congregation of these 'dabchicks' as he called them.

One morning at Mentone many Crested Terns were fishing close to the shore, when an immature Pacific Gull (*Larus pacificus*) joined the party and began diving into the shallow water with the Terns. Whether it was diving for food I could not say, but that was possible in view of the fact that I saw a number of Pacific Gulls diving under similar circumstances in Hobson's Bay on June 9, 1946. The Pacific Gull is not an elegant diver: it hovers

a few feet above the water and then 'flops' with partially-closed wings under the water, practically the whole of the bird disappearing beneath the surface.

On the morning of June 9, at Fishermen's Bend, great flocks of Crested Terns were diving at the shallow end of Hobson's Bay. Silver Gulls (*Larus novæ-hollandiæ*) and Pacific Gulls were in dozens, fluttering and calling incessantly over the water into which the Terns were fishing. Every now and then a Gull would dive into the water. The Silver Gull, although awkward, can dive quite well, and I noticed several birds fold their wings and dive out of sight. The Silver Gull is a mimic and I have noted them trying to hover over the water like the Fairy Tern, when that dainty little bird visits Hobson's Bay. But on this occasion I am sure the Gulls were attracted by the shoals of fish into which the Terns were diving.

It is interesting, in watching such expert divers as the Crested Tern and the Gannet, to observe the difference in their actions after a successful dive. The Gannet usually rests on the water before taking to the air again, whereas the Crested Tern leaves the water almost immediately on completing its dive. In the air it gives a distinct 'shiver,' as if to complete the swallowing of its catch.

The only Fairy Tern (*Sterna nereis*) seen during the winter was a lone bird on a sand-spit at Fishermen's Bend on August 4, 1946; but on June 16, 1946, Mr. Jack Jones noted twelve White-fronted Terns (*Sterna striata*) resting on the rocks and a sand-spit at Fishermen's Bend. Attracted, no doubt, by the abundance of food in the Bay, this rare visitor joined the great number of terns already in the Bay. On June 23 I visited the Bend and had my first view of this attractive bird. A pair were resting on the sand-spit in company with Silver Gulls and Crested Terns. Also on this spit were Double-banded Dotterels (*Charadrius bicinctus*), a unique combination of these two New Zealand breeding birds resting almost side by side at the Bend. On July 7 a pair of White-fronted Terns were again noted, and on August 4, 24 birds were seen at the Bend. Nine were surface feeding over the shallow end of Hobson's Bay, just fluttering a few feet above the water and every now and then dipping their bills into the water but not diving. The other birds were all resting on the sand-spit together with Crested Terns and the lone Fairy Tern—another good winter record for the Bend in the shape of three species of terns noted together. On August 6 four White-fronted Terns were noted, and on August 24 nine birds were seen. My last record for 1946 for the White-fronted Tern was four birds at the Bend on August 31.