

## Breeding of the Southern Black-backed Gull on Moon Island, New South Wales

By A. J. GWYNNE, New Lambton, N.S.W.,  
and D. F. GRAY, Blackalls, N.S.W.

Moon Island, known locally as 'Green Island', lies about half a mile off the entrance to Lake Macquarie, the nearest township being Swansea on the Pacific Highway. The island is some 17 miles south of Newcastle and 60 miles north of Sydney and consists of a flattish plateau about 20 feet high and roughly 100 yards long by 50 yards in width. Below the plateau is a line of rocks and rock platforms, spray-swept in rough weather, and mostly covered when the tide is high. The eastern, or seaward, side, through constant pounding by the waves, is steep and rocky.

There are no trees or shrubs on the Island. The vegetation, which is mainly confined to the higher parts, is composed of coarse grasses, pink-flowering 'pig-face' and a few well-established clumps of prickly pear. The soil is a sandy loam and is deep enough to hold the nesting burrows of Wedge-tailed Shearwaters (*Puffinus pacificus*) and Little Penguins (*Eudyptula minor*).

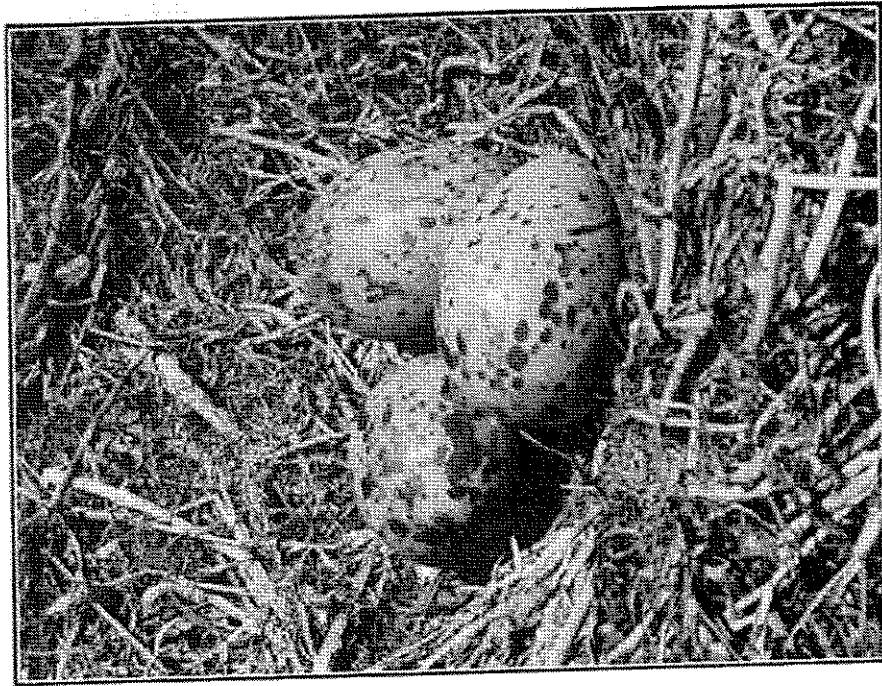
Our main purpose in visiting the Island was to check on the nesting of Silver Gulls (*Larus novæ-hollandiæ*) and to obtain photographs of the birds. We landed during the morning of September 13, 1958, and, while walking over the plateau, noticed three Black-backed gulls (*Larus dominicanus*) in the air. One of the birds gave a series of piping calls: all three were in fresh plumage and kept together most of the time.

Our next visit was made on November 15, 1958. On the south-eastern side of the plateau we disturbed two of the Black-backed Gulls. They took flight from a rock ledge near a sheltered position and then flew out to sea before coming in to land on the rocks at the foot of the Island. A search near the spot where the birds were first seen revealed what we took to be the commencement of a nest. The nesting material comprised a few lengths of pig-face weed placed in the ground close to a rock face.

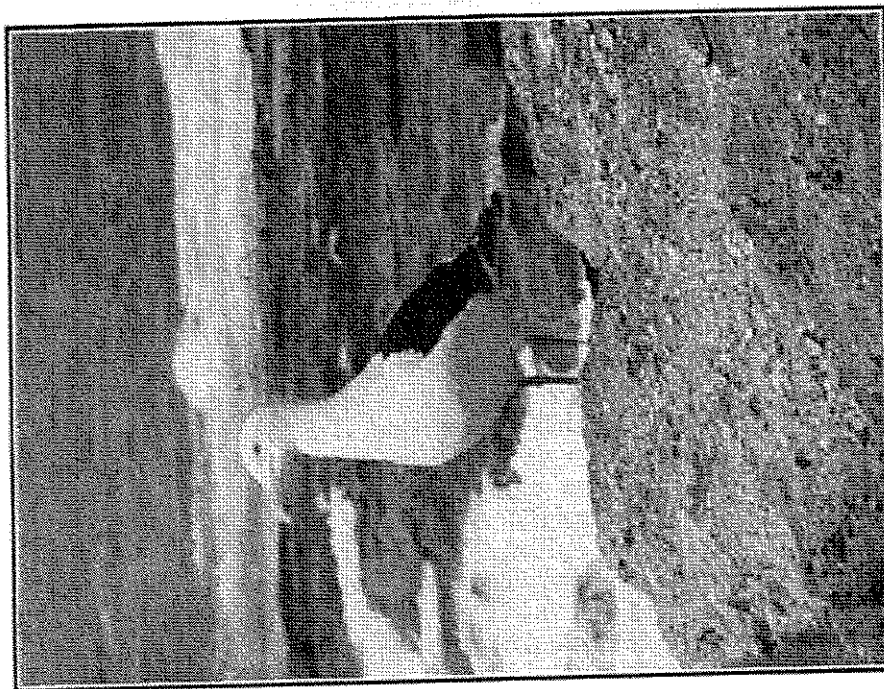
We landed on the Island again on December 20, 1958. The big Gulls were not seen until we reached the top of the plateau when one of them took to the air, presumably from the nest-site located on November 15: the bird was soon joined by its mate.

Since our previous visit the nest had been completed and now held three eggs. Naturally we were both excited and delighted with the find because, to our knowledge, this was the first record of the nesting of the species in Australia.

The two Gulls would not brood while our cameras were focussed on the nest. We moved our gear back some distance



Eggs of Southern Black-backed Gull, Moon Island,  
20/12/58.



Southern Black-backed Gull, Moon Island, 20/12/58.

Photos. by A. J. Gwynne.

and with the aid of telephoto lenses, were able to make several exposures of the birds resting on rocks near the nest.

The nest was built chiefly of pig-face and coarse grasses. It was a substantial structure, some 22 inches across the base with sloping sides rising about 5 inches to a nesting cavity 10 inches in diameter and 3 inches deep. The three eggs varied slightly in ground colour from greenish-stone to stone, and were blotched and spotted black and brown with underlying markings of dull purple. They were smooth and slightly lustrous and measured (a) 72 mm. x 51 mm.; (b) 68 mm. x 51 mm.; (c) 69 mm. x 50 mm.

We did not, at any time, see the Black-backed Gulls feeding during our visits. The species is known to eat all kinds of animal matter, including carrion, living birds and their eggs, and shell-fish. Silver Gulls and Crested Terns were nesting on the Island in numbers and the eggs and young of those birds were doubtless eaten on occasions. The Black-backed Gull is also known to feed on shoal fish at sea.

We planned to visit the Island again on January 3, 1959, but had to content ourselves with a view from the mainland because of stormy weather. However, we were able to land on January 17. The nest of the large Gulls was empty but nearby we found parts of the eggs, indicating that hatching had been successful. A thorough search failed to locate the nestlings which may have been hiding amongst the pig-face and grass. The adult birds were not seen when we reached the Island at 7 a.m., but later flew in from the direction of the mainland.

According to W. R. B. Oliver (*New Zealand Birds*, 2nd ed., 1955), the incubation period of the species is 29 days; the young leave the nest when a few days old and can swim when a week old; they can fly when five or six weeks old and can fend for themselves at seven weeks. His information came from A. S. Wilkinson of Kapiti Island.

The Black-backed Gull, also called Dominican Gull and Kelp Gull, has a wide distribution throughout the southern hemisphere—South Africa, South America and New Zealand and most of the sub-Antarctic Islands. It is only in recent years that it has extended its range to eastern Australia where it has been noted in coastal New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania. Both adults and immature birds have been observed since 1943 and it is possible, in view of the presence of dark-plumaged first-year birds, that nesting has taken place prior to our record from Moon Island. The small coastal islands of New South Wales are, except in a few cases, seldom visited by bird observers, and any such breeding would most likely pass unnoticed.

Our thanks to K. A. Hindwood for assistance during the preparation of these notes; also for details of the nest and measurements of the eggs of the Black-backed Gulls taken when he was on the island with us on December 20, 1958.