

SHORT NOTE

Gadfly petrel feeding on Lake Taupo

On 18 January 1992, I observed a gadfly petrel feeding on Lake Taupo, central North Island. At the time I was windsurfing at 5 Mile Bay, about 300 m offshore in a stiff southerly, and the surface of the lake was broken by a 0.5 m chop. The petrel was about 30 m away and hovering 0.5 - 1 m above the water. At frequent intervals it would descend to take whatever it was feeding on from the surface. I was able to observe the bird for several minutes but, after turning the windsurfer about, could not see it again.

Although I have seen many gadfly petrels on northern offshore islands I am unable confidently to identify them at sea. From experience with Cook's Petrel (*Pterodroma cookii*) and Pycroft's Petrel (*P. pycrofti*) I am reasonably confident it was one of these. Perhaps the more likely to be found inland is Cook's Petrel. Petrels have been recorded at Lake Taupo in the past 10 years but only after severe storms (Cam Speedy, pers. comm.).

There are several records of colonies of petrels in the inland North Island before the 20th century, some of which were harvested by Maori (Taylor 1855, Mead 1960). Of particular interest is a note by Buller (1894), who visited Motutaiko Island in Lake Taupo and reported it being riddled with rat burrows. The rat associated with burrows is usually the Norway rat (*Rattus norvegicus*), which would be quite capable of eradicating a colony of small gadfly petrels. However, Motutaiko is some 3.5 km off the eastern side of Lake Taupo and well beyond the known swimming range of Norway rat when not assisted by currents (pers. obs.). The rat more likely to have been on Motutaiko is the kiore (*R. exulans*), which could have been eradicated by the cats which, according to Buller, were released to control rats by Topia Turoa. Subsequent visits to Motutaiko by naturalists have not detected rats: relative abundance of weta, snails, geckos and skinks, compared with islands with rats, indicates no rats today (Mike Meads, pers. comm.).

What was a small gadfly petrel, possibly a Cook's, doing inland at that time of year? Being summer breeders, Cook's would be feeding chicks in January. Did Buller observe rat burrows or petrel burrows on Motutaiko? Cook's burrows could be mistaken for Norway rat burrows as they are of a similar size. Buller knew that rats were on Motutaiko but not which species, and may have assumed the burrows were rat burrows. Are petrels prospecting on Motutaiko? If so, this may result (perhaps) from increased pressure for them to disperse from Little Barrier Island and seek other breeding sites, since 1980 when feral cats were removed and the population has expanded. The interesting point may be that Motutaiko in Maori means simply petrel island.

I thank M.J. Imber for useful criticism of this note.

LITERATURE CITED

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