

THE TURNSTONE

By R. A. Falla

THE birds called "waders" ("shore-birds" in America) comprise a well-marked order of wide distribution. There is little doubt that, like ducks and geese, they originated in what are now the Arctic regions and spread from there to all parts of the world. Some are local and resident species in the extremities of the land masses of the Southern Hemisphere, but others are still true to their breeding grounds in the Arctic, which they leave on long migration during the northern winter. The Godwit is the most conspicuous and probably the most numerous of the Arctic waders visiting New Zealand. There is, however, an assortment of smaller and related species also spending the southern summer months in New Zealand although not so well known to observers. The most important of these are the Knot, Lesser Golden Plover, and the Turnstone. Of these we have selected the Turnstone for the cover picture of this issue, as it is by disposition one of the tamest of the waders and should become more so as it has recently been placed on the list of Absolutely Protected Birds. There is urgent need that waders on the protected list should be properly distinguished as many of these birds consort with flocks of Godwit, and are therefore in danger of being shot down during the open Godwit season through carelessness or ignorance.

As the tide recedes and shallow estuaries and sand banks become exposed, the wader flocks gradually appear and dispose themselves according to their feeding preferences. While the Godwit and Knot assemble in dense flocks on sandy spits and the outer mud-banks, a few Turnstones will usually be found scattered about amongst stones and streamlets near high

water mark. They haunt mussel beds and the odd corners of estuaries and hunt for their food under loose shingle. They stand low on their legs and run about in short erratic spurts. They also have a vigorous method of picking up lumps of seagrass or weed and flinging it over their shoulders before picking rapidly at the sandhoppers or other organisms thus exposed. They may be recognised by the chattering call, and, if one is close enough, by the orange colour of their legs. On the wing they give an impression of black and white contrasts, which is rather unexpected, as this pattern is not visible when the wings are closed. The bright breeding plumage shown in the picture is to be seen in March just before the birds leave for the long flight to their breeding grounds. October arrivals are drab and grey, and it is during their stay in New Zealand that a moult transforms them into the gay livery of the illustration.

Nothing much is known about their migration route except that they occur on passage at many islands in the western Pacific. Explorers of Arctic regions have found them nesting, and report that the nests are mere holes between tufts of moss, sometimes lined with grass or reindeer hair. The nesting season is a short one, four eggs being laid in June, and the young are able to leave with their parents by the end of August. They take full advantage of the short Arctic summer with its long daylight and temporary abundance of food supply, but with the shortening days they set out on the long journey over trackless sea to their regular haunts in the Southern Hemisphere. This migration takes place from many points on the Arctic Circle and takes Turnstones to all the lands of the Southern Hemisphere.

THE HOME OF THE TURNSTONE.

