

Miriam Ballard Memorial Essay Competition

PRIZEWINNERS, 1950.

First Prize: CRAWFORD SCOTT PENNYCOOK, age 15, 104 Beverley Rd., Timaru, Timaru Boys' High School.

Second Prize: HAROLD V. COOP, age 15, 9 Renfrew Ave., Mt. Albert, Auckland, Auckland Grammar School.

The Society congratulates these two and thanks the other competitors. The First Prize Essay is printed below.

OBSERVATIONS OF THE CASPIAN TERN

(*Tara-nui*)

(*Hydroprogne caspia*)

FOR the last three years, I have been observing the habits of a colony of Caspian Tern, which nest at Waitarakao Lagoon, Washdyke, Timaru. These birds are not numerous, although I have counted sixty-four in a nesting colony. In appearance the adult is very striking, with its large orange-red beak, jet-black cap, pure white underplumage, and pale grey back. On shore, it is very ungainly, as its body looks too heavy for its short legs, but in flight it has grace, combined with great "manoeuvre-ability" and power.

In this district, the first bird arrives in mid-July, and from then they gradually increase in numbers until early September, when the first egg is laid. On 9th September, 1947, there were twenty birds, and one egg; on 6th September, 1948, twenty-four birds and eight nests, with one, two, and three eggs; and on 6th September, 1949, twenty-two birds and two eggs. Every week, the numbers rapidly increase, until early November, when the laying is almost finished, and chicks range from newly hatched to half-grown.

Most nests consist of sticks and stones, arranged in a hollow, with occasionally a few feathers and scraps of seaweed. They lie close together, and usually contain two, sometimes three, fawn eggs, heavily blotched with brown and grey, and about the size of a hen's egg.

During the nesting period they display nervousness, and are difficult to approach, the whole colony arising with a great clamour while you are still some distance away. They are warned in

plenty of time by the scouts, who utter their characteristic raucous squawks, "Kark-ka-ka-kark." These scouts often betray the presence of the colony before it is in sight.

Small fish seem to be the diet of the sitting birds. I have seen Caspians come in from the sea, land on the edge of the colony, and with the fish held crosswise in the beak, thread their way among the others. Often they are pecked at, but finally find their mates, to whom they feed their fish.

The newly-hatched chicks, which resemble balls of creamy-white fluff faintly mottled on the back, lie perfectly still, but as they grow older they resent interference, and show their fright by opening the beak and uttering faint, harsh noises. The half-grown young, on disturbance, are herded by the adult birds to the edge of the sea, where they are often badly tumbled by the incoming waves.

A common enemy to both eggs and chicks is the Black-backed Gull. Immediately the colony is disturbed, the gulls come swooping in, but are attacked and driven off by the parent birds. Many shells with large holes in the side have been found. Very often the colonies are washed away by heavy seas, but these persevering birds immediately set up a new nesting site. For example, in 1948, between August 31st and September 21st, the eggs were washed away three times, but despite this a successful brood was raised in late December.

—CRAWFORD S. PENNYCOOK.



Two young black-ecked gulls on Rangitoto Island. Photo by Harold V. Coop, second prize-winner, Miriam Ballard Memorial Essay Competition.



Original sketches by Miss R. Shanks (13 years).