

AVIAN VISITORS

By P. Grant

On the West Coast of the South Island observant nature lovers at times have opportunities of seeing unusual birds for New Zealand, birds that for some reason or other have left their normal localities and after a long ocean crossing found a resting place.

Many New Zealanders have seen our kotuku or white heron and know that it nests near Okarito, the only known nesting area in New Zealand. These magnificent birds have been joined over the past few years by some royal spoonbills, somewhat similar at a glance, but having a very long bill which flattens like a spoon at the end. It feeds in the water with a sweeping sideways movement of its head. Here, too, over the past months we have had a white ibis reported inland from Hokitika and again south of Westport. A few years ago two of these large white wading birds with black-tipped wings spent a number of months about a farm near the Arahura River mouth. They have black heads and long unusual down-curving black bills. They fly with their necks outstretched and not tucked up in flight as do the white herons and little egrets. Recently a little egret, a bird very similar to the white heron, has been seen about the Greymouth area. It is a smaller and more vigorous bird than the white heron and lacks the stately and deliberate movements of the white heron. The little egret moves around rapidly and uses its feet to stir fish from the weeds. It may even chase after them with its wings flapping. This would be a thing much too undignified for a white heron to do. The white-faced heron, which is fairly widespread over the country, uses its feet to stir out fish from the weeds too. Have you seen one do this?

Not only around our swamps and lagoons do we find strangers. Over the past year or two fishermen surfcasting near river mouths have had the opportunity of seeing a very small tern considered to be a little tern, which we would normally expect to find on the Australian coast. It is noticeably smaller than our normal white-fronted terns. It will be interesting to try to track it down to its roosting place so that we can find out more about it. I have seen two together in October, and according to an Australian book these



Photo: A. Prickett

Mr. Slater, of Auckland Branch, plants a puriri at Beachhaven School, Arbor Day, 1960.

birds breed from October to January or February, nesting on sandspits or beaches just above highwater mark. Their nest is a depression in the sand. If this is the case, I am afraid our fierce and sudden westerly storms may easily wreck any hopes of a successful nesting should they try to nest here.

Now for the most recent Australian visitor. This bird was not seen alive but was found in an unused house. It had flown inside through a broken pane of glass, but on the way out hit an unbroken pane and killed itself—a very unhappy ending to its long flight. On examination we found it to be an owl, and a very handsome one indeed. It was one foot and one inch in length and had a wingspread of three feet. About its eyes it had great white discs fringed with light brown at the top and dark brown at the bottom. Its underparts were white with occasional dark spots and its back was basically a soft grey with buff patches showing through the other brown and white markings. The white tail had four brown bars across it. This was an Australian barn owl and only the third to be found in New Zealand. The first was found at Barrytown, north of Greymouth, in 1947, and the second one was run over by a car as it rose from a road south of the Haast River in 1955. It was hampered by the rat that it was lifting.

I have mentioned some of the birds which we have seen; but how many do we miss?