

JUNIOR SECTION*

The Gannet is a Spectacular Bird

By C. J. R. Robertson

Common round the northern shores of New Zealand, the gannet is a spectacular bird both at sea and on land. For the fisherman the sight of diving gannets generally means shoaling fish and a good catch, while for those people fortunate enough to have visited one of the nesting colonies there is the vivid memory of birds massed together in a noisy and colourful spectacle.

The gannet is a member of the booby family, which is related to the families of shags, pelicans, and frigate-birds. The Australasian gannet is one of three closely related subspecies in the North Atlantic, South Africa, and Australia.

As a sea bird its main environment is out at sea, and nesting areas are generally on some 12 off-shore islands from the Three Kings in the north to Little Solander in Foveaux Strait. There is an exception, however, at Cape Kidnappers in Hawke's Bay, where the only mainland nesting colonies in the world are easily visited by active members of the public.

From June to September each year the adult gannets return to the nesting grounds, after their winter wanderings round our shores, and begin nesting for another year.

Both parents gather seaweed and other vegetable matter for the saucer-shaped nest. The nests are closely packed together except where the birds nest on cliffs. The distance between nests is determined by the pecking distance of the birds, and squabbles are common when birds stray out of their own area. The single egg is usually laid from September to November.

After six weeks of incubation by both parents, a small black naked chick is hatched. From 10 days old a white fluffy coat of down rapidly appears, until at a month and a half the chick is thickly covered.

The parents have to work very hard to satisfy its great appetite and they travel many

miles in search of small squid, mullet, and garfish, which make up much of the gannet's diet. The chick is fed by the parent regurgitating partly digested food into its hungrily opened gape. When two months old the chick starts to lose the down and develop its juvenile plumage of speckled black and white, with black bill and grey-black legs and feet.

By the end of January the four-month-old chicks, now up to 2 lb. heavier than their parents, are ready for a migratory flight which will take them across the stormy Tasman Sea to the eastern coasts of Australia.

They spend the first two and a half years of their life in Australian waters gaining their adult plumage before returning to New Zealand and their home colony. Only about 15 per cent of the young birds survive this dual crossing. After roosting round the nesting colony for one to two years they start breeding when about five years old.

Sometimes compared with the goose, and called in Britain the Solan goose, the gannet is about 3 ft. long, with a wing span of 5 to 6 ft., and weighs 5 or 6 lb.

The adult is predominantly white, with buff-gold feathers on the crown and back of the head, while the main flight feathers at the rear of the wings and the central tail feathers are black.

The strong, sharp bill, with slightly hooked tip, is greyish blue. The dark grey-green of the leg and web is transected by light yellow-green lines running down the leg and along the top of each toe.

The adults are most commonly seen round our shores during winter, and closer to nesting colonies from October to March, when groups of up to 20 or more may be seen flying in formation in search of food or milling above shoals of fish. The chicks are most commonly seen at sea or cast up on the shore on the north-east coasts of the North Island between February and June, as large numbers of them move north before crossing to Australia.

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