

BIRDLIFE OF AITUTAKI, COOK ISLANDS

By PETER CHILD

INTRODUCTION

During a visit to the Cook Islands, my wife and I spent 5 days (30 August to 3 September 1980) on Aitutaki, where we made a concerted effort to determine the composition and status of the birdlife. In recent years the only published records referring specifically to this atoll were of the Pacific Golden Plover (Holyoak 1976) and the Pacific Lorikeet (DuPont). It thus appeared that, although the avifauna of Rarotonga had been fairly extensively documented by several visitors in the past decade, that of Aitutaki was rather neglected. During our brief visit we observed 18 species. The only species which we found definitely breeding during our visit was the White Tern.

On 1 September we hired a launch and visited five motus in the south-east corner of the atoll, which were said to be the best places for breeding seabirds. On 2 September we spent 3 hours searching the low-tide mudflats between Nikaupāra and the airport, on the lagoon side of the main island, a distance of about 10 km. Although we spent a lot of time "sca-watching" we saw no petrels, shearwaters or other procellariids.

Place-names mentioned in the text are shown in Fig. 1. In the following notes, local Aitutaki names are given after the scientific name. (In some species local names vary for different islands in the Cook group.)

SEABIRDS

RED-TAILED TROPICBIRD *Phaethon rubricauda* (Tavake)

Present in small numbers; said to breed on Maina and Motukitiu islets. On 1 September we recorded a total of 10 flying to and fro about the SE motus.

WHITE-TAILED TROPICBIRD *Phaethon lepturus dorotheae* (Rakoa)

Present in small numbers; said to nest on rock ledges and cavities in basalt cliffs on Maungapu (120 m) and another outcrop a little further south. Greatest tally in one day was 12.

BROWN BOOBY *Sula leucogaster plotus* (Toroa)

Although largely unknown by the locals (and evidently not breeding here), we had several sightings of single birds flying low over the sea, mainly out beyond the reef. On 30 August, with a choppy sea and stiff SE breeze, three were fishing inside the lagoon off the jctty at Tautu.

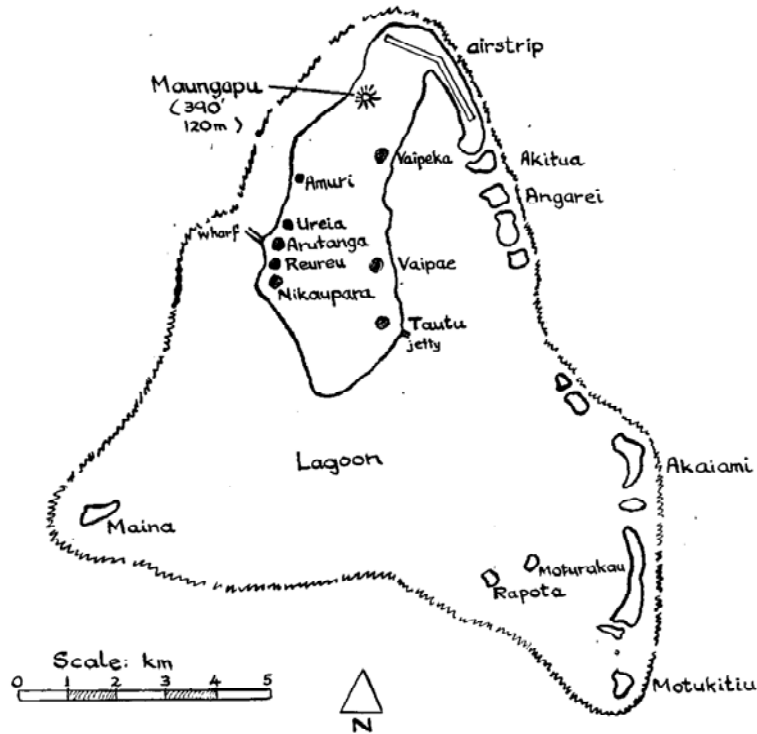


FIGURE 1 — Sketch map of Aitutaki, showing localities mentioned in the text.

GREATER FRIGATE BIRD *Fregata minor* (Kota'a)

Although odd individuals were seen over the lagoon each day, the greatest concentration was a flock of 57 over Motukituu on 1 September. Of these, only five were adult males, and a similar handful were immatures (with rusty heads), all the others being adult females. They are said to breed only on this islet.

COMMON NODDY *Anous stolidus* (Ngoio)

Uncommon, but mixed flocks of white and dark birds at sea beyond the SE motus on 1 September could have contained further birds of both noddy species; said to breed on Motukituu. Four birds were seen singly flying about during the lagoon trip on 1 September. On 2 September, one was seen to catch a fish in the breakers on the reef off Akitua.

WHITE-CAPPED NODDY *Anous minutus minutus* (Ngoio)

Uncommon, but many could have been present in the flocks

mentioned above. Four adults were recorded during the lagoon trip on 1 September, and on two other days one was seen fishing in the lagoon off the Arutanga wharf. As the locals do not distinguish between the two noddy species breeding was not confirmed — it probably does occur on Motukitui. On 1 September, one fully grown immature was standing on the lagoon beach at this islet.

WHITE TERN *Gygis alba candida* (Pirake)

Common, sightings of twos, threes and fours all day, giving aerial displays, and coming and going between sea and land; also, flocks at sea at the limits of vision with binoculars probably contained this species. On 3 September, 7 to 10 birds were frequenting a large flame tree outside the post office. On 1 September at Motukitui, we sighted a half-grown chick and five immatures perched on pandanus limbs inside the forest, with several pairs of adults hovering about. There are undoubtedly several other treed areas where they breed.

SHORE BIRDS

PACIFIC GOLDEN PLOVER *Pluvialis fulva* (Tolea)

Common, and probably increasing during this southern migration period of our visit. For example, on Rarotonga, we could find only three on 23 August, whereas a fortnight later there were dozens along reefs, beaches and grassed areas. At Aitutaki, they were scattered along the airport verges and runways as well as along the beaches, reefs and mudflats at low tide. In 3 hours on the lagoonside mudflats of the main islet, we recorded 44 on 2 September.

WANDERING TATTLER *Tringa incana* (Kuriri)

The commonest wader around all coasts and open substrates: sandy beaches, mudflats, reefs, dead coral, tidal pools, and occasionally on grassed areas. Greatest single total was 58 in the 3 hours as above. On two separate occasions we witnessed behaviour which suggested an adult was trying to sever its parental ties with an immature attendant bird.

SIBERIAN TATTLER *Tringa brevipes*

There seems to be no separate vernacular name for this species. Of 99 Tattlers recorded, most of which were examined intensively and often at very close range, only three were identified as this species: marginally smaller, silky-grey upperparts, whiter eyestripes, lack of barring on underparts, subtly different yellow shade of leg colour, and the characteristic variation of call. Close comparisons were made alongside a Golden Plover (one bird at Vaipae on 2 September), and among a group of five Wandering Tattlers (two birds at Akitua on 2 September).

TURNSTONE *Arenaria interpres*

No vernacular name obtained. Only one bird seen, at Tautu

breakwater on 30 August. The Cook group seems to be the eastern limit in the South Pacific for this wader.

BRISTLE-THIGHED CURLEW *Numenius tahitiensis* (Kivi)

At the islet of Motukituu on 1 September, five birds were roosting during high tide under the shade of coastal shrubs above a coral pebble beach. Very close views were obtained and the characteristic calls were heard when the birds were flushed.

Two others were frightened from the grass verge at the southern end of the airstrip on 2 September.

ASIATIC WHIMBREL *Numenius phaeopus variegatus*

No vernacular name obtained. On 30 August, four were preening just above high tide level on a dead coral beach at the islet of Akitua. A few minutes later, a fifth flew in from the lagoon to a nearby sand-bar.

On 2 September, during a 3-hour mudflats survey, one Whimbrel was sighted, possibly one of the original five. Whitish rumps and characteristic calls identified this subspecies.

REEF HERON *Egretta sacra sacra* (Kotuku)

A common bird around the beaches and reefs. After our experience in Rarotonga, we were agreeably surprised to find the white phase almost as numerous as the grey. Highest tallies in any one day were: grey 26, white 17, and mottled 4.

One grey-phase bird seen near the whimbrels on 30 August was so large that we wondered at first if it were another species, but there was no other feature to suggest so. Mayr (1945) stated that birds from further west (New Caledonia and the Loyalty Islands) are larger, subspecies *albolineata*. Could a straggler have reached Aitutaki?

GREY DUCK *Anas superciliosa pelewensis* (Mokora)

During the mudflat survey on 2 September, we flushed one flock of 10 and a single bird from the shelter of coastal vegetation out into the lagoon shallows. Features noted in comparison to the NZ subspecies (*superciliosa*) were the more contrasty head-stripes, bold patterning of the upperparts, and the overall smaller size of the bird.

LAND BIRDS

PACIFIC LORIKEET *Vini peruviana* (Nun-bird, Kuramo'o)

Although said by some locals to be hard to find, we recorded this bird as reasonably common. Flights of one, two, or three birds could be seen among the bananas and palms on most parts of the main island, and at other times calls were frequently heard. They were observed eating the flowers of both coconut palm and mango tree. We could not ascertain from local people whether this lorikeet is native or introduced — DuPont (1976) says "possibly introduced." This is the only island in the Cook group where it occurs.

LONG-TAILED CUCKOO *Eudynamys taitensis* (Karavia)

Alarm calls were heard from two separate birds in tall scrub on Maungapu track on 31 August; one was seen by the roadside later the same day. On 1 September, one flew out from bushes on the islet of Moturakau and returned to the same spot.

INDIAN MYNA *Acridotheres tristis* (Government bird,

Manu kavamani)

Abundant, especially around settled and cultivated areas. A few were noticed on the SE motus. Upon return to Rarotonga on 4 September, we found that the government had just decided to impose a bounty of 10 cents per beak on this bird because of the damage it is causing to fruit and vegetable crops. It is also blamed for the alarming decrease in native forest birds on Rarotonga. (The myna was introduced 50 years ago to control white aphids and other insect pests of citrus orchards.)

LITERATURE CITED

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**SHORT NOTE****CHATHAM ISLAND PIGEON AND POSSUM SHARE FOOD**

The Chatham Island Pigeon (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae chathamensis*) survives as a precariously small population on the main Chatham Island. Competition for food with the introduced possum (*Trichosurus vulpecula*) could be a contributing factor. The following observations were made in late August and early September 1980 in the Tuku Valley, while I was a member of a party led by D. E. Crockett searching for the nesting area of the Taiko.

The Chatham Island lancewood (*Pseudopanax chathamicum*) was fruiting profusely and Pigeons were seen on several occasions feeding on the berries. All Pigeon droppings found under these trees consisted entirely of lancewood seeds in a purplish matrix (the colour of the ripe berries). Many possum droppings were found in the same area, each containing between 25% and 50% by volume of lancewood berries and the rest macerated plant material. There appeared to be no shortage of berries at the time, but this may not always be the case at other times and for other foods.

An island flora has fewer species than an equivalent area of mainland, and on the main Chatham Island plant diversity has been further reduced by introduced mammals. Competition for the remaining succulent fruits and shoots may therefore be acute.

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