

BIRDS OBSERVED AT SCOTT ISLAND, ROSS SEA, ANTARCTICA

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Scott Island (67°24'S, 179°55'W) is a basaltic volcanic plug about 500 m long and 150–300 m wide about 550 km north-east of Cape Adare, the closest point on the Antarctic Continent. It was discovered on Christmas Day 1902 by the ship *Morning* and named after Captain R.F. Scott. Few landings have been made on Scott Island and there is no other account of the birds that occur there. Harper *et al.* (1984) list the birds that they thought bred on Scott Island but provide no other information on their status.

The island is surrounded by precipitous cliffs and over half the area above the cliffs is ice-capped. There are small coves with beaches on the northeastern coast and opposite Haggits Pillar on the western coast of the island. Both beaches are probably covered by ice for much of the year and wave-washed by storms when ice free. Two hundred and fifty metres west of the island is Haggits Pillar, which rises to 62 m.

We report on two visits to Scott Island. The first on 2 February 1967 when P.C.H. circled the island about 750 m offshore aboard the USNS *Eltanin* and approached to within 300 m by dory but was unable to go ashore. The second on 7 January 1982 when we were both part of a team of New Zealand and USA scientists who spent two hours (09h00–11h00 NZST) ashore. In 1982 we visited both beaches and searched for birds along the entire coastline during low-level helicopter circuits.

In 1967 six birds (two Antarctic Petrels *Thalassoica antarctica*, two Antarctic Prions *Pachyptila desolata* and two Wilson's Storm Petrels *Oceanites oceanicus*) were collected from a dory about 300 m from Scott Island. All six birds had brood patches and active gonads. These specimens are now held at the Museum of New Zealand, Wellington.

SPECIES RECORDED

Adélie Penguin *Pygoscelis adeliae*

Adelie Penguin feathers, probably from a moulting bird, found in a sheltered site on the northeastern beach were the only signs of penguins using the island.

Antarctic Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialisoides*

In 1982 one Antarctic Fulmar was seen flying close to shore in the northeastern bay and five were seen from the beach opposite Haggits Pillar. Several were patrolling the cliffs of both the island and the pillar and one or two alighted on the western cliffs of the island. Birds landing ashore suggest that Antarctic Fulmars probably breed on Scott Island, but numbers are likely to be low.

Antarctic Petrel *Thalassoica antarctica*

Up to five Antarctic Petrels were seen in the bay opposite Haggits Pillar during the 1982 visit and one alighted on a high ledge. Breeding was not confirmed.

Pintado Petrel *Daption capense*

Pintado or Cape Petrels were seen only in the bay opposite Haggits Pillar and only in 1982. Three were watched as they approached the cliff tops and two landed on guano-splattered ledges above the beach. A second similar area with guano stained rocks was found 50 m north of the bay as we left the island by helicopter but breeding was not confirmed at either site. Both areas were small and could have supported no more than a few nests.

Snow Petrel *Pagodroma nivea*

Snow Petrels are thought to breed at Scott Island. During the approach to the island in 1982 one flew from cliffs on Haggits Pillar, and a second flew from a crevice on the northern headland of the island. Two others were flying close to the cliffs and another 15 near the beach opposite Haggits Pillar. Most of these birds were flying close to the pillar. Snow Petrels were seen close to the cliffs of Scott Island and Haggits Pillar in 1967.

Antarctic Prion *Pachyptila desolata*

In 1967 many Antarctic Prions were seen close to the island and Harper (1972) guessed that about 200 pairs bred there. No prions were seen on or near the island in 1982.

Wilson's Storm Petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*

Wilson's Storm Petrel was the most numerous bird at Scott Island and probably breeds on the island and on Haggits Pillar. In 1982 five were seen in the northeastern bay and three of these were flying close to the cliff tops. About 12 were seen from the beach opposite Haggits Pillar; one was foraging amongst the ice floes 25 m offshore while the others patrolled the cliff edges.

BIRDS SEEN OFFSHORE

In February 1967 the surrounding sea was free of ice; (surface temperature 0.2°C). From 12 nautical miles south of the islands at 09h20 P.C.H. sighted an immature Light-mantled Sooty Albatross *Phoebastria palpebrata*, three adult New Zealand Black-browed Albatrosses *Diomedea melanophrys impavida* and small groups of Snow and Antarctic Petrels. Closer to the

island several dozen Black-browed Albatrosses, four adult Light-mantled Sooty Albatrosses, three Pintado Petrels and two flocks (of c. 1100 and 200 individuals) of Antarctic Petrels were congregating to eat salps and crustaceans *Euphausia* sp. About 300 m from the Island some 24 Antarctic Prions in fresh plumage were seen. A single immature Southern Giant Petrel *Macronectes giganteus* was also observed.

In 1982 heavy pack ice surrounded the island and no birds were seen from the ship about five kilometres west of the island while waiting to go ashore. Only a few Snow Petrels, Antarctic Petrels, Adélie Penguins and one Emperor Penguin *Aptenodytes forsteri* were seen during two hours of observation immediately after we left Scott Island and were steaming south-west towards Cape Adare.

DISCUSSION

We expected seabirds to be more numerous on Scott Island since it is over 500 km from the nearest land, in an ocean reputed to be highly productive, where seabirds are usually thought to be numerous. However, Scott Island provides limited terrain suitable for breeding seabirds. The two beaches are small, exposed to storm-generated waves and are probably ice covered for much of the year, so are unsuited for use by breeding penguins.

The terrain is little better suited for petrels. Although there are numerous ledges and shallow crevices suitable for Wilson's

Storm Petrels and Snow Petrels, and some larger fissures suitable for the larger petrels, these were restricted to cliffs where the rock was shattered and unstable. The highly eroded nature of the cliffs provided few secure nest sites. No skuas *Catharacta* spp. were seen on either visit.

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Wilson's Storm Petrel by Liz McMahon
(Harrison, J.A. et al. 1997. *The atlas of southern African birds*)