

# PLOD ESSAY:

## The Mutton Birds

I love to quote from an article published in *The Powlett Express* in 1909. It is without a by-line but is probably written by the first editor, Mr Cranage:

“Last spring, the Powlett plains were a wilderness. Scarcely a fence was seen and the lonely horseman might gallop for miles across the sword grass seeing no life but the flocks of plover rising and circling over the solitary marshes.”

Now, with only a very few plovers attempting to build their nests in the most vulnerable places, it is only these words, which remind us of a time of plenty. The image of “flocks of plover rising” is wonderful, but tragic.

Nola Thorpe came across another article in *The Express*, written in 1949 called “The Mutton Birds of Our Bass Strait”. In it was this description from the journals of Bass when he and his small crew saw “a stream of sooty petrels fifty to eighty yards in breadth”, which passed them without interruption for a full hour and a half. The men thought there were at least 100,000,000 of them.

In her own article in the *Bass Coast Post* Nola wrote, “One evening recently [in March] I went with some friends to see the short-tailed shearwaters return from their day at sea with food for their chicks. The best time to go is probably a clear, still evening in January or February. As the sun sets below the horizon, you can see rafts of birds starting to gather out over the breakers.”

She goes on to site another description from the same 1949 *Express* article:

“In hundreds they come, cutting the air with long, narrow wings, swooping low over the land, rising again, then diving sharply till they almost touch the waves below. Though moving without apparent pattern, they manoeuvre with such perfect control that there is never a contact, however slight, between them. For half an

hour they circle, spying out landing points, then when darkness is almost complete, one alights followed immediately by thousands of others all scuttling to their underground shelters.”

It must have been quite an event to see those birds arriving from their great migration for the papers would announce it: “Once again the mutton bird season is at hand and people for



miles around are busy arranging excursions for the weekend trip, and a large crowd of holiday makers are expected at San Remo for the weekend.” *Powlett Express*, November 21, 1911.

Again, it is a wonderful image, until one realises that over one-hundred-and-fifty years, the quantity of birds had dropped from a hundred million birds in 1798 to “hundreds” of birds in 1949. Today the birds still come in their hundreds, but not so many hundreds. There are fewer and fewer each year.

Much of what follows is an edited version of the long article in the 26<sup>th</sup> August 1949 issue of *The Powlett Express* on page 6:

The Scientific name for the mutton bird is *Puffins tenuirostris*, but it is known by several names: sooty petrel, mutton bird, short tailed shearwater. According to *The Express*, the name mutton bird came about because “the birds came like sheep to the slaughter.”

The mutton bird lays only one pure white egg in its burrow. The burrows are usually two or three feet in length and have a scanty lining of grass or feathers at the nest end, which is often only a few inches below the surface. Laying begins as soon as the birds arrive in November.

There are often fierce and noisy squabbles as the newly migrated birds fight over who gets which nest.

In the dim light of morning the flock departs for the day far out to sea. The birds have short legs and long wings [wing span about 1 metre] so on their webbed swimmer's feet, they make their way to a high spot or cliff top to enable them to take off, but when launched they become masters of the air. Once incubation of the egg begins, only one of the pair of birds goes out to sea, waiting all day on the nest for the

returning partner to bring food. Later, when their chicks are hatched in about mid-January, both birds fly out each morning. Upon their return to the rookery, it



takes almost a full hour for the parent birds to find their hungry young. There is much confusion of gurgling, babbling and squawking before the rookery settles down. The chicks become engorged with fish and grow quickly; they soon become very like a bottle of fish oil. If a young bird is held head down, the reddish coloured oil simply runs out through the bill. Twenty young birds produce a gallon of oil!

As the season wears on, the young grow their flight feathers, but still sit and wait for their parents to feed them. By Easter, however, the parents have abandoned their chicks, who are full-grown and much larger than their parents and looking like downy balls of fat.

This is when the "birders" gather them up, extract their oil and pickle them. The birding season was strict and announced in the paper: "The season for taking young mutton birds on Cape Woolamai opens April 20th and closes May 4th. Those who desire to collect the birds must procure a licence." *Powlett Express*, April 1, 1921. In pre-war years, during the depression, pickled, greasy

looking birds were a common sight in fish mongers windows in Melbourne

After the war, as their numbers began to fall off, Victoria began protecting the birds from this fate. And now one rarely hears of people eating mutton birds, although indigenous groups from Tasmania still collect the oil and sell it.

In 1921, there were so many birds, that after the "gathering up" there were still many, many chicks left ready to follow their parents in the great migration. Now, when the people in our area feel the mutton birds winds in April – those

winds strong enough to push the youngsters learning to fly into the air – we know we must be on the look out to keep them from harm. The bridge to Phillip Island turns off its lights at night so the young birds will not be confused and fly

towards it. There are big signs telling drivers to beware of the fledglings on the wing.

But, cars and "birders" are not all that is putting these birds at risk. Their survival all the around the world is precarious largely because of plastic that finds its way into the seas, and over time breaks up into pieces as small as a grain of sand. Next time you are at the beach – our pristine, wild beach – scoop up a handful of sand and look at it carefully. Most likely you will see what look like small coloured grains of sand. They are plastic. The thing is, unlike sand, plastic floats, and so these grains of "sand" they are swallowed and, with mutton birds, become lodged in the crop.

I wonder if one day we will be watching over the mutton birds as we now watch over the plovers, one nest at a time, despairing at their inability to lay eggs or keep their chicks alive?

- C.R.Landon, ed.

**Nola Thorpe is an important member of our Volunteer Team putting our entire collection of Wonthaggi Newspapers on database. She also writes fascinating articles for Bass Coast Post on birdwatching.**

