ORNITHOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS AT BELGRANO II STATION, FILCHNER ICESHELF, ANTARCTICA

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Observations of seabirds were made at Belgrano II Station (77 52S, 34 37W; Fig. 1) on the Filchner Iceshelf, Antarctica during the austral spring of 1985 and in late spring and summer 1990. The station was built on the Bertrab Nunatak (Fig. 2) which is about 170 m long and 140 m wide (Toubes Spinelli 1983) 5 km from the coast. Littlewood Nunatak (77 53S, 34 10W) is 10 km north-east. Two ice-free rock promontories constitute the Bertrab Nunatak, the larger, western one supports the station. Under good weather conditions, these promontories can easily be seen from the Weddell Sea as dark dots in the snow. Access is only possible by helicopter as the ground is mainly granitic and steep (Toubes Spinelli 1983). Consequently, the avifauna of the area is not well known. Previous studies were made by Novatti (1962) who reported the presence of the following species in the Weddell Sea offshore from the Filchner Iceshelf: Emperor Penguin *Aptenodytes forsteri*, Adélie Penguin *Pygoscelis adeliae*, Southern Giant Petrel *Macronectes giganteus* and Wilson's Storm Petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*. Brook & Beck (1972) observed colonies of Snow Petrels *Pagadroma nivea*, Antarctic Petrels *Thalassoica antarctica* and South Polar Skuas *Catharacta maccormicki* in the Theron Mountains, 100 km from Belgrano II. This paper describes the avifauna of the Bertrab and Littlewood Nunataks for the first time.

SPECIES LIST

Wilson's Storm Petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*

We heard calls coming from the rocks in Bertrab Nunatak, although no nests were found. During the same period in 1985, after a hard snowfall, we found seven dead adults on the rocks at Bertrab Nunatak. In the middle of January 1990, we saw two Wilson's Storm Petrel adults hovering over the rocks at Littlewood Nunatak

According to Watson (1975), eggs are usually laid between December and late January so the calls heard may have been made by adults. Nevertheless, Watson (1975) points out that the breeding schedule of this species is highly variable and can be shorter in the continent than elsewhere.

Wilson's Storm Petrels were reported in the Weddell Sea by Watson (1975) and Novatti (1962) observed an individual at sea on 9 January 1956 at 74 33S, 24 39W, about 30 km from the coast and 425 km from the Bertrab Nunatak. Our observations are the first for this species at the Bertrab and Littlewood Nunataks, which may be the southernmost breeding localities for the species.

Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus*

On 10 November 1989 P. Recabarren observed two nests on the smaller promontory at Bertrab Nunatak (about 900 m south-east of the station). The nests were made of stones and feathers and were being tended by three adult gulls. One nest had three eggs and the other two. Twenty days after the first visit, the three adults and the five eggs were still present,

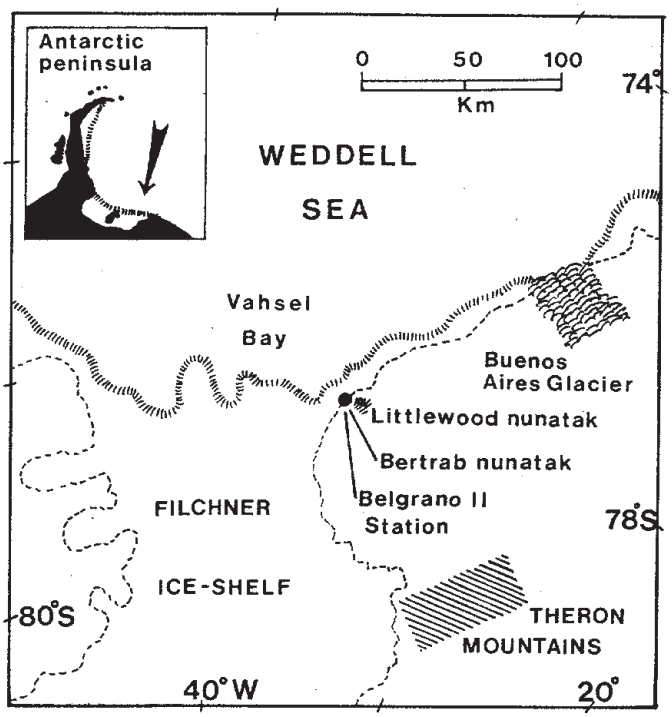

Figure 1

Position of Belgrano II Station and Bertrab and Littlewood Nunataks

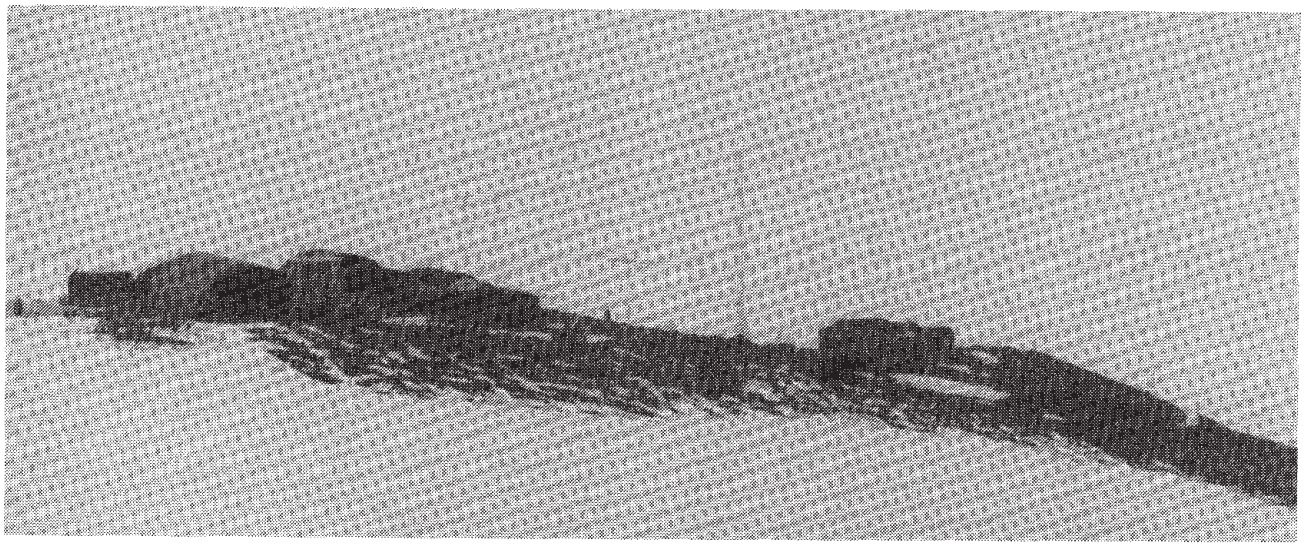

Figure 2

Belgrano II Station, Bertrab Nunatak

the eggs showing no signs of hatching. No further visits were made to the nests because of bad weather conditions. The observation of three adults and two nests suggest an unusual pairing relationship; female-female pairs that produce a clutch of unfertilized eggs have been reported elsewhere for gulls (Hunt & Hunt 1977).

South Polar Skua *Catharacta maccormicki*

Approximately 10 skuas were often seen near the station during November and December 1989 and January 1990. By the end of January they had departed. In the middle of November, P. Recabarren observed the presence of a flock of 54 individuals which remained in the area for two days before flying southeast toward the Theron Mountains.

American Sheathbill *Chionis alba*

On 19 November 1989, flocks of American Sheathbills, some numbering 150 to 200 individuals, were seen flying northeast to southeast. Some of these birds hovered over the station for a short time. Flocks had also been observed flying southeast during the first week of November 1985. One individual collided with a radio antenna and fell to the ground. Some hours later it continued its way southeast.

DISCUSSION

With the exception of Wilson's Storm Petrel, all the above observations were made between late October and middle November in 1985 and 1989 when the winds had moderated and the temperature had increased. Coincidentally, Brook & Beck (1972) recorded the first flocks of Antarctic Petrels, Snow Petrels and South Polar Skuas in the Theron Mountains during the same months. From the observations in 1985, it is likely that Wilson's Storm Petrel is the only species that breeds regularly at the Bertrab and Littlewood Nunataks, although definite breeding awaits proof.

The presence of other species in the area is difficult to explain. Watson (1975) indicates that the Kelp Gull is extending its breeding area in Antarctica. However, personnel of the station informed us that no nests were observed during spring and summer in 1990/91 (H. Ochoa pers. comm.). There is evidence that the South Polar Skua breeds in the Theron Mountains (Brook & Beck 1972). The individuals we recorded could have belonged to the populations of that area.

The presence of American Sheathbills is difficult to explain since this species only occurs in the Antarctic Peninsula up to 65S (Watson 1975, Harrison 1989). The flocks observed were presumably birds migrating to their breeding localities, which may have overshot or been blown off course by poor weather.

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