

QUEST FOR NATIVE THRUSH.

By A. R. Annabell, Waitotara.

An expedition to explore portion of the Rawhitiroa State Forest of 36,000 acres in the hope of finding the native thrush or piopio (*Turnagra capensis*) was made from February 26 to March 5, 1949. The area searched was near the headwaters of the Waitotara River and included the Pokeka Stream, a tributary, and portion of the Omaru Stream, another branch of the Waitotara River, in Southern Taranaki. The Pokeka Stream is a fairly large one; running through flat ground several chains wide for seven miles, with many open spaces growing niggerhead, stinging nettle, wineberry, etc., and unfortunately, ragwort. The side streams and valleys are beautiful places for the robin (*Miro australis*) and should be ideal country for the native thrush. The search failed to find the thrush but the robin was the most common bird in the forest. It was here that I saw my first robin, in 1919, but no more than three were seen on that or any subsequent trip; now the robin is everywhere: sixteen were seen or heard in one day. I was amazed at the great increase in the numbers of this bird.

My father, who was a surveyor and who was in the field in this country, having "triggered" it in 1887, found the robin and the native thrush present in about equal numbers—neither was plentiful. He secured several native thrushes in 1887, but these were the last he obtained. Later, the Dominion Museum got some skins from him in 1900 and the label on these skins reads, "J. R. Annabell, Waitotara, 1900." But he secured these birds in 1887, not 1900.

One of the most interesting discoveries of the expedition was a shaggery of the white-throated shag (*Phalacrocorax melanoleucos*). Eighteen nests were counted, six in one small coprosma (karamu) and eight in a tutu. One was placed on a rocky ledge. All of the nests were directly above a deep pool and the young, when they left the nests, dropped over the edge into the water and dived like a fish. After swimming in the water for a few minutes they climbed out of the water at the back of the pool and entered a cave about 2 feet above water level and disappeared. All the young birds except two in the nests in the karamu had tumbled into the pool and two half-digested bullyheads and a crayfish were seen in one nest, evidently having been vomited by one of the young. An adult shag was seen to circle the pool, land, and walk into the cave, which was about 4 or 5 feet high and about the same width. Altogether, 24 chicks were counted. Returning three days later, the young that had left their nests were seen sunning themselves on a log. On this occasion several adults arrived and fed the young in the nests; one adult fed two chicks at one session.

Four blue ducks (*Hymenolaimus malacorhynchus*) were seen; two preceded the party down a stream for five miles. The calls of the kiwi (*Apteryx australis*) were heard at night; the dried skin of one was found on a ridge. Other birds recorded were the kaka (*Nestor meridionalis*) which were heard every evening; pigeon (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*), rifleman (*Acanthisitta chloris*), grey warbler (*Pseudogerygone igata*), pied tit (*Petroica m. toitoi*), whitehead (*Mohoua o. albicilla*), tui (*Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae*), bell bird (*Anthornis melanura*), and bush hawk (*Falco novaeseelandiae*).

The creeks in the area are full of big eels and we saw many swimming slowly in broad daylight—more than I have ever seen before. A huge eel was seen in the pool beneath the shaggery swimming towards us. He was cut nearly in two with a slasher—he was a 20 pounder. I wondered how long that tuna had lived in the pool and if he was there to collect any chicks that might drop overboard. Eels were seen elsewhere eating alive a wounded pig which was disabled in the water. Wild cattle were so tame that one came up and sniffed me.