

NOTES ON THE BIRDS OF THE UPPER NGARURORO CATCHMENT

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INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 1960-61, the Forest and Range Experiment Station of the New Zealand Forest Service conducted a survey of the Upper Ngaruroro River Catchment. The opportunity was taken to record something of the existence and distribution of bird life in this region. Observations for this record were made by myself and other survey members between the dates 15/11/60 to 19/12/60 and 11/1/61 to 30/1/61. Thirty-two days in november and December, and three days during mid-January were spent in the upper Ngaruroro (north of Golden Hills) and the Taruarau head waters. Ten days in the latter half of January were spent in the mid-Ngaruroro and the Taruarau. Because of the longer time spent in the former area, observations were more complete than those in the latter. The month difference between the times of survey of the two areas could have seriously affected some results, for example, the non-recording of the Shining Cuckoo from the mid-Ngaruroro (late January) when it was most probably present, but declining in its call.

Daily records of birds seen and heard were kept throughout the survey, with notes of habitats, numbers and other relevant data. Further sources of information used were the F.R.S.S. plot-sheets and files, especially reports by P. C. Bull and R. A. Fordham.

AREA

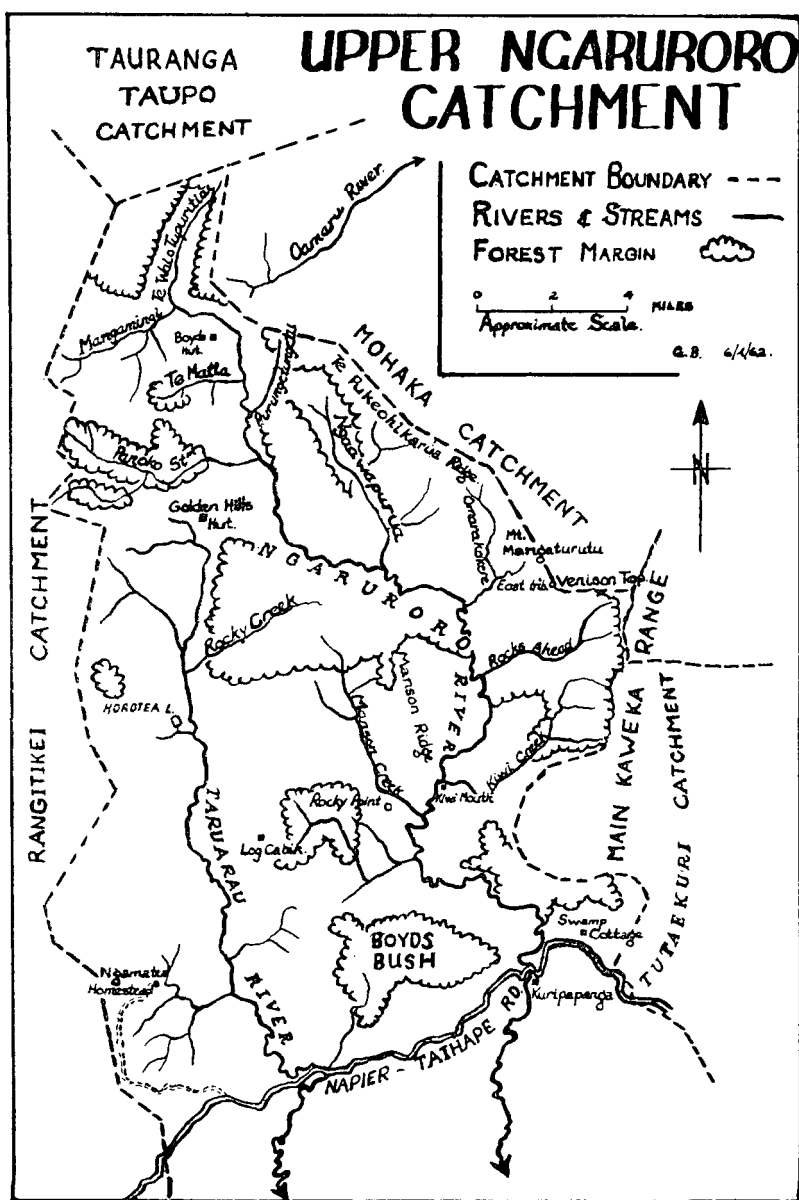
The Ngaruroro river drains the western Kaweka and northern Ruahine ranges eastward into Hawke's Bay. The area covered by these notes consists of that part of the Ngaruroro catchment with that of the Taruarau (a major tributary) north of the Napier-Taihape (Inland Patea) road. This area approximates 260 square miles. Other boundaries are the watersheds of the Kaweka Range and the Te Puke-ohikarua Ridge to the east and north-east respectively, with the catchments of the Tutaekuri and Mohaka rivers. The complete western boundary is its watershed with the Rangitikei catchment.

VEGETATION

For easier description the area is divided into four.

The drainage of the Ngaruroro river, excluding the Taruarau, south of and including the catchments of the Kiwi and Manson creeks. This is a uniform area of manuka/kanuka (*Leptospermum spp.*) scrub, giving way to sub-alpine scrub with tussock, and open ground at higher altitudes and on exposed ridges. Scattered islands of forest exist throughout, being dominantly Mountain Beech (*Nothofagus solandri var. cliffortioides*) often with Red Beech (*N. fusca*); and a patch of podocarp forest in Boyd's Bush.

The Rocks Ahead and Omarukokere catchments extending westward across the Ngaruroro river to the head of the Taruarau is an area predominantly of forest. This is of mountain beech, with some Red Beech on the lower valley slopes. Several small tops areas, over 4600ft. in altitude, have a stunted sub-alpine vegetation with some tussock, e.g. summit of Mt. Mangaturutu.



The Ngaruroro head, north of the previous area and including the Panoko valley, is characterised by *Danthonia* tussock-covered valley and river terraces. Mountain Beech forest occupies most of the mid-valley slopes with patches of manuka and *Dracophyllum* scrub. Tussock,

which covers most lower valley slopes, continues, in a few places, into sub-alpine vegetation growing on higher altitudes.

The Taruarau catchment is predominantly *Danthonia* tussock-covered with areas of manuka/kanuka and *Dracophyllum subulatum* scrub/tussock association is common. There is also a gradual transition, sub-alpine species of scrub appearing with altitude. A few small patches of Mountain Beech forest are present.

BIRDS

Thirty-five species were observed within this area during the 1960-61 survey and three other species are recognised as being present from other reports. Each species is listed below and described as to its observed distribution, habitat and abundance, along with any other relevant observations. Order of presentation and common names follow Fleming (1953) 'Checklist of New Zealand Birds.'

KIWI (*Apteryx sp.*) — From Mountain Beech forest near the summit of Mt. Mangaturutu, kiwis were heard calling on two nights in January. Small holes, which can probably be attributed to this bird as probe holes, were found in a small swampy area surrounded by beech forest, at the head of the Purungetungetu valley. Similar holes were also found in pumiceous soils amongst sub-alpine scrub on the top of Mt. Mangaturutu.

BLACK SHAG — Scattered recordings from the full length of the Ngaruroro river with one observation from the Taruarau river. It was usually seen in flight about a hundred feet above the water.

PARADISE DUCK — Found along the Ngaruroro river from the Te Wai-o-tupuritia to its confluence with the Panoko, and in the Taruarau from the Golden Hills to at least as far south as the Ngamatea Station homestead. In general this is the area of tussock-covered river flats and terraces. They were seen only in pairs, although relatively common.

GREY DUCK — Small numbers were seen along the whole length of the Ngaruroro river north of the Inland Patea road. Half the observations were from the gorge area of the river around Kiwi Mouth. Single specimens were also found in the Ngawaparua stream and low Taruarau. No more than two birds were found together at any one time.

It is worth noting that in the Oamaru stream (Mohaka catchment) on 15/11/60, two pairs were seen accompanied by only one and two young ducklings respectively.

BLUE DUCK — Present in the Ngaruroro river below its Panoko stream confluence and in most tributaries of this area, definite records coming from upper and lower Ngawaparua stream, Kiwi creek and Manson creek, as well as the main river. Most observations were made in fast flowing and rocky water courses through forest or scrub. An exception was those seen in the upper Ngawaparua where the stream crosses a shallow valley of *Danthonia* tussock.

AUSTRALASIAN HARRIER — Not present in large numbers, but occurs throughout the area, although few sightings were made east of the mid-Ngaruroro. More than half the records were from the area north of Golden Hills, where it was usually seen in flight over both open tops and tussock-covered valley flats.

N.Z. FALCON — Recorded only from the area north of Golden Hills, but most probably its distribution is much wider. Usually found associated with forested areas, but not at all common.

PHEASANT — Heard calling near Lake Horotea on 12/1/52 by P. C. Bull (F.R.E.S. files). Not recorded during this survey.

CALIFORNIAN QUAIL — Scattered records from the area west of the Ngaruroro river, namely Mangamingi, Panoko, Golden Hills, lower Rocky Creek, Manson Ridge and Rocky Point, each area represented by one or two birds seen or heard. Commonly seen along the Inland Patea road. Everywhere observed in areas of manuka scrub/tussock grassland association.

QUAIL (sp.?) — Several small quail were seen near Log Cabin on 28/1/61 by one survey member. These could have been Brown or Virginian Quail, although the possibility of these being a clutch of Californian Quail chicks cannot be overlooked.

BANDED DOTTEREL — Common during November and December along the Ngaruroro from the Te Wai-o-Tupuritia-Mangamingi confluence, to the Panoko stream. A few were also seen in the Taruarau near Lake Horotea. These are areas of gravel river-bed up to one hundred yards wide bounded by tussock flats.

Two young chicks were found on the upper Ngaruroro river bed on 11/12/60.

SOUTHERN BLACK-BACKED GULL — Recorded twice on the Ngaruroro river bed below Kiwi Mouth by R. A. Fordham (31/1/60 to 16/2/60). Not recorded during this survey.

N.Z. PIGEON — Found in Ngaruroro, Ngawaparua and Omarukokere to at least as far south as the Manson ridge. Scattered distribution throughout forested area, not at all common, single birds only being observed.

NORTH ISLAND KAKA — Distributed throughout the area north of a line from Rocky creek to Rocks Ahead stream (not recorded south), in all larger forested areas where it is moderately common. Most often seen in flight over upper valley slopes and occasionally over sub-alpine scrubland on the tops.

PARAKEET (*Cyanoramphus* sp.) — Most probably Yellow-crowned Parakeets, but none was definitely identified.

Scattered recordings were obtained from most large forest areas of the catchment. Calls were heard frequently in the Ngaruroro head to adjacent Oamaru valley. They were also present, but in small numbers, at Golden Hills and in the Ngawaparua, Omarukokere and Rocks Ahead valleys, Boyd's Bush and on the Manson ridge, where two birds were seen flying to remnant patches of Mountain Beech forest near the ridge top.

SHINING CUCKOO — Only recorded from north of Golden Hills, where they were heard calling infrequently. This was the area of survey for November and December. Probably present throughout the catchment, but not noted elsewhere because of a decline in their calling as the season progressed.

LONG-TAILED CUCKOO — Recorded throughout the catchment, although most often from the Ngaruroro head to Golden Hills and Rocks Ahead, where it was commonly heard calling during November and December. Usually found in beech forest, but occasionally in adjacent *Leptospermum* scrub.

MOREPORK — Only recorded from beech forest in the Ngaruroro head and Ngawaparua, where it was heard very infrequently.

NORTH ISLAND RIFLEMAN — Very numerous in all forested areas throughout the catchment, although it is not so plentiful in scrubland, and is almost absent from sub-alpine scrub and grassland. Often seen in family parties of adults and several young.

SKYLARK — Found in most areas of grassland in the catchment, in both valley flats and on open tops, greatest numbers being seen on valley flats.

NORTH ISLAND FANTAIL — Found throughout the catchment in forest, where they are present in moderately small numbers, usually frequenting the small areas of hardwood forest and scrub bordering streams.

Of approximately forty Fantails definitely identified, all were pied.

PIED TIT — Evenly distributed throughout the catchment, in both forest and *Leptospermum* scrub areas, where it is common. Overall it is not as common as the Grey Warbler or Rifleman.

NORTH ISLAND ROBIN — A few present in the forest areas north of Golden Hills, being recorded in the Boyd's Hut, Mangamingi, and Te Wai-o-Tupuritia areas. One was seen also at the Harkness Hut site in the Ngawaparua. Not recorded in southern half of Ngaruroro catchment.

WHITEHEAD — Present throughout the catchment, although most numerous north of Golden Hills. Confined to forested and thicker scrub areas, where they are common.

GREY WARBLER — Very numerous throughout the catchment in forest and manuka scrub, but not seen in the sub-alpine scrub or open grassland. Along with Rifleman it is the commonest native bird in the area.

SONG THRUSH — Scattered recordings from throughout the catchment, but not at all common. Greatest numbers observed in the forest adjacent to Golden Hills hut.

BLACKBIRD — Found commonly throughout the catchment in forest, scrub and adjacent tussock grasslands. A few observations were also made in sub-alpine scrub. Along with the Chaffinch it is the commonest introduced bird of the area.

HEDGE SPARROW — Recorded throughout the catchment, but is not at all common. Most observations were made in areas of manuka/kanuka scrub, but Hedge Sparrows were seen in sub-alpine scrub on three occasions. Noteworthy of these was on top of Mt. Mangaturutu.

N.Z. PIPIT — Distributed throughout the catchment in areas of grassland, greatest numbers being seen on the open tops, where it outnumbered the Skylark. Overall it is in greater numbers than the Skylark.

BELLBIRD — Recorded from the Ngaruroro head to as far south as Golden Hills and Ngawaparua, often heard calling within this area, with one observation from Rocks Ahead. Usually associated with forest and, on a few occasions, seen in manuka scrub.

TUI — Observed in forested areas throughout the catchment, most records being from the Ngaruroro head. Moderately common.

WHITE-EYE — Present in forest and scrubland throughout the catchment, although not commonly seen or heard, but several small flocks were seen during January and February.

A nest containing five eggs was found on 2/12/60 in the Te Wai-o-Tupuritia.

GREENFINCH — Recorded in the Taruarau (1952) by P. C. Bull, and at Swamp Cottage during the 1959-60 survey by R. A. Fordham (F.R.E.S. files).

Not recorded during 1960-61 survey.

GOLDFINCH — Seen only once in the upper Ngaruroro, this was seen on the valley floor of the Te Matia amongst manuka scrub. Found at Swamp Cottage during the 1959-60 survey by R. A. Fordham.

REDPOLL — Relatively common throughout the catchment in scrubland, especially in areas of manuka-tussock grassland association. Usually observed in small flocks.

CHAFFINCH — Present throughout the catchment, being one of the commonest introduced birds. Most often found in forest and scrub.

YELLOWHAMMER — Present in small numbers throughout the catchment, most records being from tussock river flats and valley bottoms. One bird was reported from sub-alpine tussock/scrubland on Mt. Maungorangi at the head of the Te Wai-o-Tupuritia valley.

STARLING — Flocks of 10+ were observed on two occasions during late November in flight over the Te Wai-o-Tupuritia valley flats. They were not seen anywhere else in the catchment.

MAGPIE (*Gymnorhina* sp.) — Present in the Taruarau from Golden Hills south, but in very small numbers. Two regularly seen from Golden Hills hut. One was also seen on the Manson ridge.

KAKAPO — Possible evidence from the Ngaruroro.

The northern Kaweka range and upper Ngaruroro catchment borders upon the area suggested by Williams (1956) as the most likely to harbour the Kakapo, if in fact this species does still survive in the North Island.

During the night of 12-13/1/61, two survey members, J. A. Mabbett and I. T. Trotman, while camped in the Omarukokere valley, awoke to hear a series of approximately five booms, as of a drum. Could these booms, as heard, have been the drumming or booming call of a Kakapo?

The over-night camp was at between 3000 and 4000 feet in the east tributary of the Omarukokere valley. N.N.W. of Venison Top. This is a forested area; pure mountain beech covers the upper valley slopes with, below 3700 feet, a predominance of Red Beech. Valley sides are generally steep with a number of small undulating top areas at 4600 feet, covered with low alpine scrub and traces of *Danthonia* tussock.

This evidence for the presence of Kakapo is meagre, but worthy of note.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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