

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NORTH ISLAND SADDLEBACK

By D. V. MERTON

INTRODUCTION

Like so many of New Zealand's native birds, the North Island Saddleback, (*Philesturnus carunculatus rufusater*), was both plentiful and widespread in pre-European times, but had vanished from most parts by the late nineteenth century, retreating rapidly before the advance of European settlement (Oliver 1955). In the Urewera and Northern Hawke's Bay, according to Best and Guthrie-Smith respectively, it had gone long before these places had been altered by settlement (Oliver 1955). Fulton considered the Saddleback extinct in all inhabited parts by 1907 (Gordon 1938). The reasons for this rapid and complete disappearance from the mainland and all islands except Hen have been attributed largely to the invasion of introduced carnivores which appeared last century. It is reasonable to assume that a bird, which had evolved in the complete absence of mammalian predators, spends much time on or near the forest floor and has but weak flight, could fall easy prey to any of the various introduced mustelids, rats or cats.

A more recent example of this can be seen to-day on the South Cape Islands off S/W. Cape, Stewart Island, where a vigorous population of South Island Saddleback (*Philesturnus carunculatus carunculatus*), has in little over twelve months, been all but exterminated following the arrival on these islands of a very efficient predator, the ship rat (*Rattus rattus*). (Bell and O'Brien 1964 — Dept. Internal Affairs file No. 46/62/19; Blackburn 1965 elsewhere in this issue; and from my own observations on three visits to Big South Cape Id., each of approximately one month's duration in 1961, 1964 and 1965).

MAORI MYTHOLOGY

It is not surprising to find that the Saddleback or Tieke of the Maori, with its aristocratic air, should figure prominently in ancient Maori lore; for example, the well known legend of Maui when he and his brothers snared and beat the sun to compel it to travel more slowly, so that man might enjoy a longer day. Following his successful encounter with the sun, Maui felt a great thirst and called to various bush birds, including Tieke, to bring him water. When in turn they failed to oblige, Maui, irritable after his exertions, seized the birds and flung them from him, leaving a scorch mark wherever his hot hands touched their plumage. As a result Tieke to this day bears on its wings and shoulders, the mark of Maui's displeasure. Similarly the male Stitchbird (*Notiomystis cincta*) received its vivid orange-yellow breast mark and the Robin (*Petroica (Miro) australis*) a white spot above its bill. The Kokako (*Callaeas cinerea*) however, obliged and brought Maui water, who, in reward, pulled its legs, so making them long as they are now. (Andersen 1926).

In Maori times the Tieke was among the most difficult to snare and for this reason was probably rarely kept in captivity. (Gordon 1938).

According to Andersen Tieke was a guardian of ancient Maori treasures and, if the name can be construed to mean "a guardian," it might rather be on this account than because it accompanied flocks of White-heads (*Mohoua albigilla*). The name "Tieke" was probably taken from the call of the bird for there is an old song used for hauling a canoe over difficult places which begins:—

| <i>One voice</i> | <i>All</i> |
|------------------|------------|
| The kiwi cries | kiwi |
| The moho cries | moho |
| The tieke cries | tieke |

If a war party should hear the cry of a Tieke to the right of their path it would be counted an omen of victory; but if to the left, an omen of evil and defeat. (Andersen 1926).

Two legendary Saddlebacks named Takareto and Mūmuhau were said to belong to the Arawa canoe migrants. The two lived on Rapanga (Cuvier) Is. and were known as supernatural beings with power to fly back and forth from the mainland. Cuvier now boasts a powerful lighthouse; thus in a practical sense does civilisation dissolve the shreds of ancient myth. (Gordon 1938).

EARLY RECORDS

During his stay at the Bay of Islands in 1772, Crozet mentions a starling, which, as Oliver (1955) points out, could only be the Saddleback. Specimens were obtained in the same locality in 1824 by Lesson, naturalist to the "Coquille"; and Yate in 1835, also records it at the Bay of Islands (Oliver *loc.cit.*).

According to Oliver Saddlebacks were recorded from Kaitaia in 1878, Cuvier Island in 1878, Great Barrier Island in 1882 and Little Barrier Island in 1862, when specimens were collected by Layard. Hutton (1896) found them very common on Little Barrier in 1869, but in 1882, after the introduction and establishment of feral cats, about this time, Reischek (1887) found them extremely scarce.

In November 1880, Reischek (1887b) discovered them in abundance on Hen Island and in February 1883, he considered them even more numerous there. This vigorous population still persists on Hen Island. (Turbott 1940; Skegg 1964) and is, in fact, the only remaining natural strong-hold of the sub-species to-day.

James Cowan recalls that Wi Parata, a Maori Chief of Waikanae, could remember the time when Saddlebacks were plentiful on Kapiti Island. (Wilkinson 1952).

By 1870, they had virtually disappeared from the mainland north of the lower Waikato (Oliver 1955) and were rare elsewhere. In the early part of this century few mainland sightings were made, the most recent of these being that of Fleming (1940) in February 1935, when a pair was seen up the Kopuapounamu River, beneath Raukumara Peak, East Cape. Oliver states that Saddlebacks still occur in the Raukumara Range, East Cape, but Williams (1962) considers that this claim, as well as recent reports from the Urewera Country (Williams unpubl.) awaits confirmation.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO TRANSFER SADDLEBACK

During an official Dominion Museum expedition to Hen Island, (1,775 acres), in November/December 1924, Oliver and Hamilton (1925 — Dept. Internal Affairs file 46/62/19), considered the North Island Saddleback to be one of the most common birds present, yet the subspecies was in grave danger, being confined to a single island. Soon after, on 28/1/1925, a meeting of the Board of Science and Arts, acting on Oliver and Hamilton's report, resolved that steps should be taken to transfer Saddlebacks to both Kapiti (5,000 acres) and Little Barrier Islands (6,960 acres), in an effort to establish other populations of this vulnerable species. Permission was subsequently obtained from the Director General of Lands and Minister of Internal Affairs in September of that year for the removal from Hen Island of up to twelve pairs of these birds and their release on the island sanctuaries of Kapiti and Little Barrier.

As a result, on 11/10/1925, a party consisting of Messrs. H. Hamilton (Dominion Museum), A. S. Wilkinson (Kapiti Island) and E. V. Sanderson (Hon. Sec. N.Z. Native Bird Protection Soc.), sailed from Whangarei to Hen Id., on the Whangarei Harbour Board's launch "Kumi" to carry out this task. They met with success, catching their first pair of birds within minutes of leaving their camp. On 18/10/25, four pairs were released, on Little Barrier Is., one female which had been ailing for a day or so having died soon afterwards.

Wilkinson (1925), who witnessed this liberation wrote: "As soon as the birds were released they started to search for food. Their only enemies on Little Barrier are wild cats which, however, are far too numerous."

By 28/10/25, when the party returned to Whangarei, they had obtained a further eleven Saddlebacks, bringing the total caught to nineteen, all of which had been secured by means of bird-lime, hand-nets or drop-traps (Hamilton 1925 Dept. Internal Affairs file). The remaining eleven birds were transported overland from Whangarei to the Paraparaumu coast, from where they were taken by launch and released on Kapiti Island, twenty-two hours after leaving Whangarei. On arrival, two birds were found to have died in transit, leaving four males and five females, all of which were said by Wilkinson to have been "a little bedraggled but perky." These birds survived to breed successfully at least three times during successive years, but were not seen after 1931.

Wilkinson suggests that Bush Hawks (*Falco novaeseelandiae*) may have been responsible for the Saddlebacks' disappearance, but it is more likely that they, too, succumbed to the depredations of introduced rats, as did it seems, Kapiti's original Saddleback population. It must also be remembered that Kapiti at this time, according to Wilkinson, was over-run by possums, feral sheep and goats, which had damaged the island's vegetation considerably. Both sheep and goats have since been removed.

The Little Barrier Is. liberation, however, was apparently much shorter-lived. Even under the most favourable conditions such a small liberation (3 pairs and one male) could hardly have been expected to colonise an island the size of Little Barrier (6960 acres).

Gordon (1938) in reference to this transfer says that the Saddleback were harried from the island by Tui (*Prosthemadura novaeseeland-*

iae) on the second day after liberation and were never heard of again. This seems a most unlikely explanation for their failure to persist, as the two species live in harmony on Hen Is., and were previously found together throughout New Zealand as well as on several islands including Little Barrier. The wild cat population of Little Barrier Is., is the obvious culprit, as it was last century, when the island's original Saddleback population was quickly exterminated following the establishment of feral cats (Turbott 1947).

After a visit to Hen Island in November/December 1933, Edgar Stead reported that Saddlebacks were flourishing still and suggested that a liberation on the Chicken Is., four miles to the north of Hen Is., would be beneficial; but it was not until 10/12/48 that this transfer was recommended by the Rare Birds Advisory Committee.

Authority was granted the Wildlife Branch, Department of Internal Affairs by both the Minister of Internal Affairs and the Director General of Lands, for the removal of up to 20 Saddlebacks from Hen Is., for release on each of the two larger Chicken Is. On 17/5/1949 Messrs. L. C. Bell and F. Woodrow (Department of Internal Affairs), E. G. Turbott (Auckland Museum) and A. S. Wilkinson (Kapiti Is.) arrived at Hen Is. to tackle the project. This attempt proved abortive, however, as by 6/6/1949 only five birds were on hand. Two of these were captured in a mist-net, two in drop traps and the other in a hand net. A severe storm then caused the death of two of the captive birds, so it was decided that the remainder should be set free on Hen Is. again and the quest abandoned for the time being.

Another expedition was launched by the Wildlife Branch on 1/6/1950 when Messrs L. C. Bell, H. J. Ollerenshaw (Wildlife Branch) and W. D. F. King (Aviculturist from Invercargill), arrived at Hen Is. This attempt proved more successful as on 12/6/1950, three pairs of Saddleback were set free on Big Chicken (Marotiri) Is. (332 acres), two of these birds having been captured with bird-lime and four by means of a hand operated drop-trap, baited with live insects.

A visit to this island in December 1953 by R. B. Sibson and a party of King's College Bird Club members (Chambers, Chambers and Sibson 1955) revealed that at least one pair of Saddlebacks was still present, but none has been reported since.

Recent visits to Middle Chicken (Whakahau) Is. (168 acres) by the writer and other Wildlife Officers, following the transfer of 23 Saddlebacks to this island in January 1964, as described elsewhere in this issue (Merton 1965), have shown that the birds are persisting. The most recent visit was on 20/5/1965, when ample evidence of breeding was obtained. A total of twenty-two Saddlebacks were recorded, of which a minimum of seven were juveniles bred on the island.

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SHORT NOTE

AN UNUSUAL DOTTEREL NEAR NEW PLYMOUTH

In the late afternoon of 17/4/65, my wife and I noticed an unusual dotterel feeding on a small, slightly muddy sandbank at the estuary of the Waiongona River, 7 miles north of New Plymouth. As we were on the opposite bank, distance as well as poor lighting conditions made it impossible to attempt to photograph the bird. However, a diagram made at the time to show the main features, when compared with the plates in Notornis VIII, 251-2, leaves little doubt that it was *Charadrius leschenaulti*.

Being familiar with both the N.Z. Dotterel (*C. obscurus*) and the Banded Dotterel (*C. bicinctus*), I placed this bird about midway in size between the two. Its most prominent feature was a dark brown to black band extending from behind the head to just in front of the prominent black eye. A slightly lighter band extended along the crown. The wings appeared to be mottled grey to brown, with a noticeable darker band. The under surface, chest and face were otherwise light in colour, a chest band extending only partly beyond the carpal flexure of the wing. The beak was dark and robust, and the legs appeared to be flesh-coloured.

All the time it was under observation, the bird was feeding by taking short runs and probing with the beak into the sand. It was noticeable that it did not indulge in the frequent bobbing of the head which is characteristic of the other two dotterels mentioned.

On our attempting a closer approach, the bird flew off and was not seen by us again.

— M. G. MACDONALD

[The summer of 1964-65 seems to have been a "good one" for the Large Sand Dotterel in New Zealand. Three were present in the Firth of Thames for several months. Two were reported from Kaipara in January and April. Later one may have over-wintered in Manukau Harbour. — Ed.]