

NOTES ON THE BIRDS OF THE RUAHINE RANGES

By C. N. CHALLIES

New Zealand Forest Service, Wellington

INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 1961-62 the author took part in a vegetation condition survey of the Ruahine Ranges carried out by the Forest and Range Experiment Station of the Forest Research Institute, New Zealand Forest Service, and made use of the opportunity to record observations of the birds within this region. Between 14/11/61 and 16/1/62, the party, of which the author was a member, spent 40 field days in the northern half of the range, i.e. north of the Tukituki catchment, traversing all major catchments except the Ikawetea. Less time was spent in the southern Ruahines, two crossings of the range via the Pohangina, Tamaki and Makawakawa valleys being made in late January. In early February short visits were made to the Whanahuia Range and Mt. Wharite, and a further three days were spent in the Tukituki catchment. The Pourangaki and Oroua valleys, forming the mid-western drainage of the Ruahines, were not entered.

The author also kept bird records on earlier trips to the Ruahines. Eleven days were spent in the Ikawetea watershed and Ruahine Corner-Otupae Range area in February 1961 (1960-61 F.R.E.S. survey) and a further two days in April 1961.

The requirements of these surveys did not allow time to be assigned to bird observations, but throughout them the author kept daily lists of bird species seen and heard, these being as comprehensive as other work would permit. The daily lists included the number of observations of each species by vegetation classes, to determine habitat occupation and abundance. From these records the bird notes have been compiled.

AREA AND VEGETATION

The Ruahine mountain system (see figure 1) is a central section of the main mountain range of the North Island of New Zealand. The Manawatu Gorge marks its southern boundary with the Tararua Range and the Napier-Taihape (Inland Patea) road, passing through a gap in the main range, separates the northern Ruahines from the Kaweka and Kaimanawa Ranges. An axial ridge extends the length of the mountain system and four major ridges radiate from it to the west. Much of these ridges exceeds 5,000 feet in altitude, but the southern third of the main range tapers to a narrower ridge of less than 4,000 feet.

The Ruahines are forested from the foot of the range, where the forest abuts on farm land, to the upper forest line. Mountain Beech (*Nothofagus solandri* var. *cliffortioides*) is the dominant forest species of the north and central range up to 4,000-4,500 feet, with some Red Beech (*Nothofagus fusca*) at lower altitudes. Above the forest line is a narrow scrub belt of leatherwood (*Olearia colensoi* and *Senecio elaeagnifolius*), especially in the central range, and of low-growing shrubs. Above this again tussock grassland extends to the

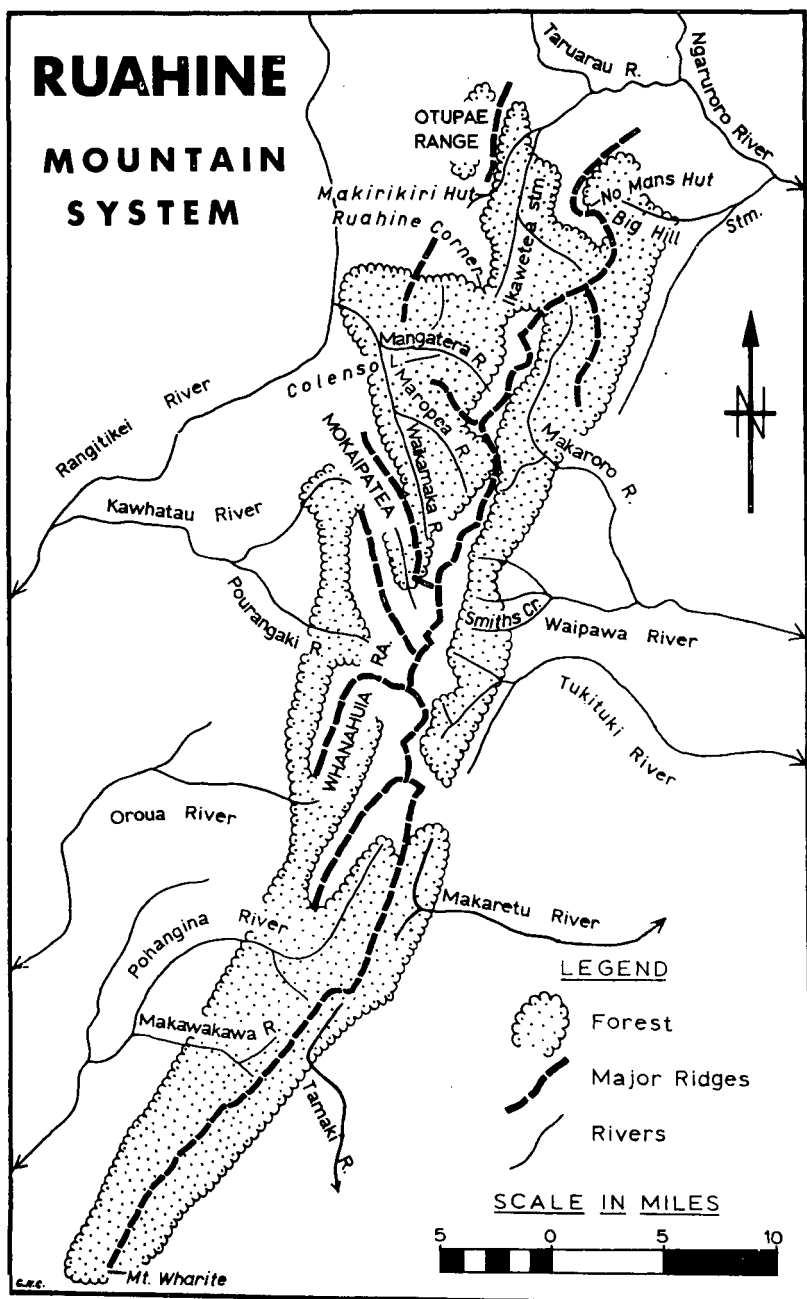


Fig. 1 — Map showing localities mentioned in the text.

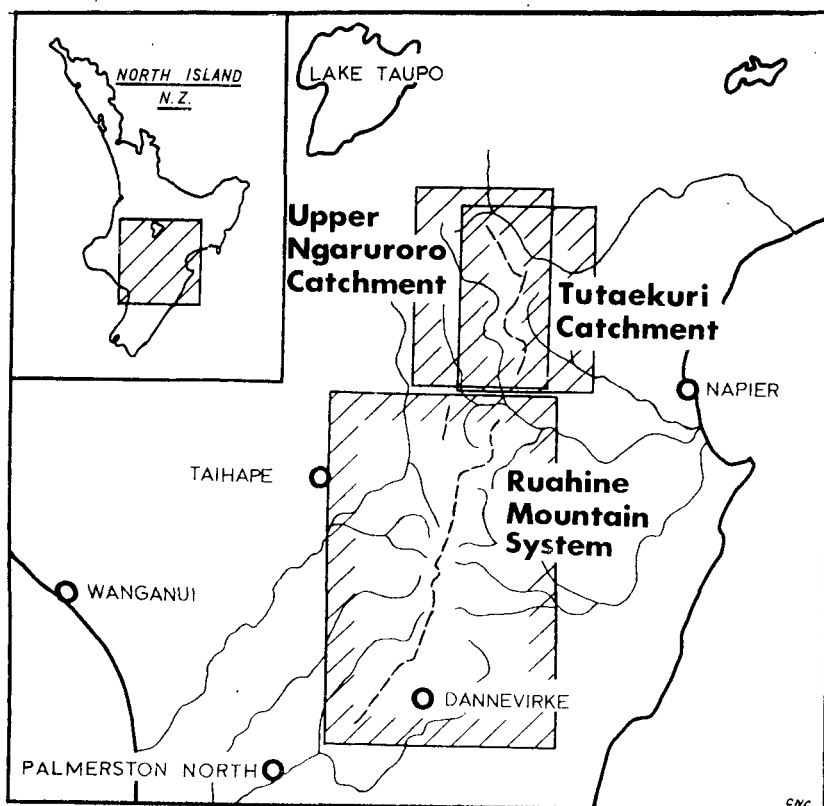


Fig. 2 — Map showing the location of the high-country areas detailed in the maps of Fordham (1961, p. 114) and Challies (1962, p. 123), and in figure 1 of this paper.

highest altitudes, being replaced by fell field on exposed sites. In the southern range, podocarp/hardwood forest occupies the lower slopes and kamahi (*Weinmannia racemosa*) is dominant on valley slopes up to 3,000 feet. Here it merges into leatherwood scrub, which persists to the crest of the range. Cedar (*Libocedrus* spp.) forest replaces mountain beech along the western flank of the range from Ruahine Corner to the Whanahuia. Traces of lowland podocarp forest remain on the flank of the range and a few pockets exist within the range, such as around Colenso Lake and near Makirikiri hut. In the north, tongues of manuka (*Leptospermum scoparium*) scrub and tussock extend into the Ruahines from the Blowhard and Ngamatea Plateaus.

RUAHINE BIRDS

Thirty-five species were observed within the Ruahine mountain system during the 1961-62 F.R.E.S. survey and two other species, the Greenfinch and Cirl Bunting, are recorded as present from earlier reports. Also included are two nil records, Kiwi and Robin. In the

following list, the notes on each species include its observed distribution, habitat, and abundance, along with any other relevant observations. Nomenclature and order of presentation follow the 1953 "Checklist of New Zealand Birds."

KIWI (*Apteryx* sp.)

No kiwis were observed. There appear to be no recent records of kiwis from the Ruahines (R.W., V.B., A.C., N.L.E., C.N.C.). Fleming (1941), with reference to *A. mantelli* (North Island Kiwi), states: "Once on Ruahines. No recent reports except on Whareti, over ten years ago" (i.e., before 1931).

BLACK SHAG (*Phalacrocorax carbo*)

A single bird was seen in flight along the Makaroro River near the mid-Makaroro hut in January 1962.

HERON (White-faced ?)

A greyish-blue heron was seen recently on the tussock tops near No Man's Hut (V.B.).

PARADISE DUCK (*Tadorna variegata*)

These birds were not observed within the mountain range but were seen on several occasions, usually alone or in pairs, near the forest edge in the Makaroro and Waipawa catchments. Larger numbers were seen in the wider, braided section of the Makaroro river bed, stretching a mile upstream from the Wakarara Mill; in November eight or more pairs, with at least two clutches of ducklings, were counted. A single bird was seen on the tussock grassland west of the Otupae Range.

GREY DUCK (*Anas superciliosa*)

This species was uncommon. Occasional single birds and pairs were seen along the larger rivers. Two were also seen to rise from a forest-enclosed pond of 10 by 30 yards in the lower Tukituki catchment. Lake Colenso, 4 acres in area and bounded by rushes and swampy ground, suggests desirable duck habitat, but three F.R.E.S. parties that visited it all reported an absence of waterfowl. The number of eels present may make these waters unsuitable.

BLUE DUCK (*Hymenolaimus malacorhynchos*)

Blue Ducks were present in all the western rivers from the Ikawetea southwards to the Kawhatau, sightings being especially numerous in the gorge of the Mangatera near Lake Colenso. Of the remaining western drainages, no records are known from the Oroua and Pourangaki, and no birds were observed in the Pohangina and Makawakawa Rivers. Occasional pairs and single birds were seen in the eastern rivers, namely the Makaroro, the Waipawa and Smiths Creek, but none in the Tukituki and Makaretu catchments (V.B., R.W.).

AUSTRALASIAN HARRIER (*Circus approximans*)

Harriers were regularly seen in flight over all subalpine tussock-grassland (tops) areas, and on farm land adjacent to the range.

Harriers probably feed to some extent on deer carcasses on the tops, although this was not observed. V.B. reports that they have often been seen perching close to carcasses.

NEW ZEALAND FALCON (*Falco novaeseelandiae*)

Scattered sightings of this species were made throughout the range, more birds being seen in the Makirikiri area than elsewhere, but

generally they were not common. They were heard or seen in flight over all vegetation types, but most commonly over sub-alpine vegetation and upper forest margins. One was seen viciously pursuing a Harrier at Armstrong Saddle in mid-December.

PHEASANT (*Phasianus colchicus*)

Occasionally birds were heard calling in the area between and including Ruahine Corner and the Makirikiri catchment. Single observations were made near Sentry Box hut and on lower Herricks Spur (A.C.). Pheasants are probably present throughout the area of manuka scrub and grassland adjacent to the Napier-Taihape road and as far south as Ruahine Corner on the west of the range and the Makaroro River on the east.

CALIFORNIAN QUAIL (*Lophortyx californica*)

Commonly seen along the Napier-Taihape road.

SOUTHERN BLACK-BACKED GULL (*Larus dominicanus*)

Single birds in flight were seen on several occasions in the Otupae range area. All appeared to be purposefully following the same route, some east to west, others west to east.

Occasional birds scavenge within the mountain range. A Black-backed Gull was observed feeding from a deer carcass on Mt. Paemutu at the head of Smith Creek (R.W.). Other birds have shown interest in working parties on the tops.

NEW ZEALAND PIGEON (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*)

Pigeons were moderately common throughout the forested areas, being most numerous in the podocarp forests around Lake Colenso and the Makirikiri hut. They were usually seen in groups of from one to four birds flying over the lower and mid-valley slopes, but were occasionally seen up to the subalpine-scrub zone.

KAKA (*Nestor meridionalis*)

This species was not common. Birds were observed in the areas of podocarp forest near Lake Colenso and Makirikiri hut and a few in beech forest. One was also heard over kamahi forest in the mid-Pohangina valley.

PARAKEET (*Cyanoramphus sp.*)

Parakeets were recorded in small numbers from the forested areas north of and including the Tukituki catchment. They were not observed in the southern half of the range but are not necessarily absent.

No birds were identified to species. Other records suggest that both the Yellow-crowned (*C. auriceps*) and the Red-crowned (*C. novaeseelandiae*) are present, but no indication of their relative numbers is given. In the adjacent Tutaekuri drainage, Caughley (1962, p. 138) identified 14 parakeets to species. All were Yellow-crowned and it is probable that this species also predominates in the Ruahines.

The New Zealand Parakeet (Red-crowned) has been reported from the Ruahines. N.L.E. states that his last certain identification was from Colenso's Camp on Colenso's Spur in January 1948. Also, Wodzicki (1950) recorded Red-crowned Parakeets east of the Tukituki catchment: "Flock of four feeding on beech, Miln's Block, S.F. No. 34, near Ashley Clinton, Ruahines, 22/4/48." S.F. 34 is an error for Eastern Ruahine State Forest 24.

SHINING CUCKOO (*Chalcites lucidus*)

Shining Cuckoos were recorded in the forests of all catchments visited in November and December (the northern half of the range), where their calls were frequently heard. Only a few were heard calling in the areas traversed in January; they were probably present in moderate numbers but would be less conspicuous because of a decline in their calling.

LONG-TAILED CUCKOO (*Eudynamis taitensis*)

Heard calling throughout the duration of the survey but at no stage common. Scattered records of this species were made from forested areas throughout the range and occasionally from the sub-alpine belt up to 4,500 feet.

MOREPORK (*Ninox novaeseelandiae*)

This species was recorded in small numbers from all catchments visited, being present in beech, podocarp and kamahi forests. Moreporks were usually heard calling from the lower and mid-valley slopes; an exception was a bird that called loudly near an overnight camp on the upper forest line (4,650 feet) near Mt. Remutupo.

KINGFISHER (*Halcyon sancta*)

Kingfishers were not found far into the range; single birds were recorded in the "cut over" podocarp forest north of the Wakarara Mill and also in the lower reaches of the Makaroro River and Big Hill Stream.

RIFLEMAN (*Acanthisitta chloris*)

Rifleman were abundant throughout the range in beech, podocarp and kamahi forest up to the upper forest line. They were rarely seen outside forested areas.

SKYLARK (*Alauda arvensis*)

Larks were plentiful on lower altitude tussock grassland such as that in the north-western corner of the range and were also present on the open tops.

The skylark outnumbered the pipit on the taller *Chionochloa* tussock found at altitudes up to about 4,000 feet. On the sub-alpine areas of tussock, short grasses, herbs and bare ground the situation was reversed. The following figures from the author's daily records for 4/1/62 to 9/1/62 illustrate this: the ratio of skylarks to pipits seen between the Napier-Taihape road and the NW Otupae Range was 10:0, on the summit ridge of Otupae Range it was 3:9, and between upper Makirikiri and Ruahine Corner, 17:4.

FANTAIL (*Rhipidura fuliginosa*)

This species was present in moderate numbers in forest and scrub throughout the range. Birds were most often seen on the lower valley slopes and especially in the hardwood forest and scrub bordering streams. No individuals of the black phase were seen.

PIED TIT (*Petroica macrocephala toitoi*)

Present throughout the range in all forest types and in tall scrub. It was one of the three commonest native species of the forest, the others were the Rifleman and the Grey Warbler.

ROBIN (*Petroica australis*)

No robins were seen and there are no recent records of these birds in the Ruahines (R.W., V.B., A.C., N.L.E., C.N.C.). Fleming (1950) also noted the absence of Robins: "Major R. A. Wilson states that he has never seen robins in the Ruahine Range and there are no other reports." However, N.L.E. has seen this species within the range on two occasions — on Government Spur (Tukituki catchment) in December 1940 and at Shut Eye (northern Waipawa catchment) in December 1944.

WHITEHEAD (*Mohoua albicilla*)

Scattered observations were made of Whiteheads in mountain-beech forest and they were heard also in the forests of the Pohangina and Tamaki valleys. Several birds were seen also in the tall sub-alpine scrub of the Maropea catchment and above 4,000 feet in the mountain beech of the Otupae Range.

GREY WARBLER (*Gerygone igata*)

This species was abundant throughout the Ruahines. It was present in all forests and in sheltered areas of sub-alpine scrub, including that dominated by *Olearia colensoi*.

SONG THRUSH (*Turdus ericetorum*)

Thrushes were present in small numbers in all forested areas. Several were also seen in sub-alpine scrub. A nest containing three eggs was found in stunted (15ft. high) mountain beech at 4,250 feet on the Mokaipatea, 6/12/61.

BLACKBIRD (*Turdus merula*)

Blackbirds were abundant in all forest and scrub areas, especially in the more open vegetation. They were very common in sub-alpine scrub and in grassland where scrub species persisted. Blackbirds were four times as commonly seen as either Hedge Sparrows or Thrushes. Along with the Chaffinch the Blackbird was the commonest introduced species present.

HEDGE SPARROW (*Prunella modularis*)

Scattered observations of this species were made throughout the range, but generally Hedge Sparrows were not very common. They were found in both sub-alpine and lowland scrub and were occasionally seen in predominantly forested areas.

PIPIT (*Anthus novaeseelandiae*)

Present on the open tops as well as on low altitude tussock grasslands, e.g. north of Ruahine Corner. See notes for the Skylark.

BELLBIRD (*Anthornis melanura*)

Moderately common in forested areas throughout the range. One was seen in leatherwood scrub in the Tukituki catchment.

TUI (*Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae*)

This species was found mostly at lower altitudes, especially in podocarp forest. In these localised areas they were common, e.g. at lower Makaroro, around Lake Colenso, on the lower Mokaipatea and in the Makirikiri hut area. They were uncommon in beech forest.

WHITE-EYE (*Zosterops lateralis*)

Found in all forest types and in scrubland throughout the range. They were seen and heard only occasionally in November and December but became more noticeable during January and February when small noisy flocks were seen at all altitudes in forest and scrub and occasionally in flight over the open tops.

GREENFINCH (*Chloris chloris*)

Inclusion of this species is based on a single observation: in February 1961 two birds were seen among stunted mountain beech at 4,500 feet on Mt. Ikawetea.

LESSER REDPOLL (*Carduelis flammea*)

This species was present over tussock tops, in sub-alpine scrub, including areas dominated by *Olearia colensoi*, and in lower altitude manuka scrub. Flocks were seen from late November onwards, becoming larger and more numerous during January and February when they could be heard in flight over the tops even in wet and misty weather.

CHAFFINCH (*Fringilla coelebs*)

The commonest introduced species in the forests of the lower and mid-valley slopes. Here the birds were most often seen where the forest canopy was broken, for instance along stream-beds. They were seen also in manuka scrub and occasionally in sub-alpine scrub.

YELLOW-HAMMER (*Emberiza citrinella*)

This species was common in the tussock grassland between Ruahine Corner and the Otupae Range, especially in the upper Makirikiri catchment, where the tussock is interspersed with manuka scrub. This area is a southward continuation of the tussock grassland of the Taruarau catchment (upper Ngaruroro). One bird was seen on the lower Mokaipatea, but none were seen or heard in sub-alpine tussock or scrub.

GIRL BUNTING (*Emberiza cirrus*)

The inclusion of the Girl Bunting in this list is based on a single record. One bird, a male, was seen in the Big Hill Stream area in November 1944 (N.L.E.) Cf Fordham's (1961) record of a single bird seen in the Tutakuri catchment.

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*)

Several sparrows were seen associating with Chaffinches in a small flock near Makirikiri hut (February 1961). A single bird was also seen near farm land west of the Whanahuia Range (January 1962). Both observations were from beech/podocarp forest.

STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*)

A few Starlings were seen in the upper Makirikiri catchment where they nested in outcrops of shelly limestone. They were not recorded elsewhere within the range but were often seen on adjacent farm land.

MAGPIE (*Gymnorhina* sp.)

Magpies were commonly seen along the foothills, and in the north-western corner of the range they penetrated the tussock-grassland areas of the upper Mokaipatea and Ruahine Corner. Small groups were

noted on several occasions along the summit of the Otupae Range up to 4,500 feet. Elsewhere in the Ruahines, only one record is known from above the forest line, namely at Mt. Remutupo (V.B.). Small isolated groups (usually consisting of two birds) were also found in forested areas near Colenso Lake, below the Waikamaka-Maropea confluence (A.C.), on Weka Flat (upper Kawhatau River) (V.B.), and upstream of the north Makawakawa hut (Makawakawa River). In each of these localities the birds were seen near natural clearings in the forest, such as those formed by large unhealed slips.

DISCUSSION

Little has been published concerning the presence, distribution and habitat occupation of birds in much of the high country of New Zealand, the main mountain ranges of the North Island being no exception. However, this paper is the fourth contribution from field workers with the Forest and Range Experiment Station, Napier. Those previously published are by Fordham (1961) and Caughley (1962) detailing the birds of the Tutaekuri catchment, and by Challies (1962) on the upper Ngaruroro catchment. The Tutaekuri and upper Ngaruroro catchments lie to the east and west respectively of the Kaweka Range and both have a common (arbitrary) southern boundary — the Napier-Taihape road — with the northern Ruahine Ranges.

The avifaunas of these three areas show great similarity, especially within vegetation types, as is to be expected from the geographic proximity and similar terrain of the regions. Of the species not common to the three areas, the Kiwi and Robin are of special interest because the boundaries of their distributions do not appear to coincide with any change of habitat. Both species, although present in the Kaweka and Kaimanawa Ranges, are either absent or rare in the Ruahines as they are in the Tararua and Rimutaka Ranges to the south.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks are due to Mr. A. Cunningham (F.R.E.S., Napier) and other members of the 1961-62 Ruahine survey team for their help and encouragement. I am grateful to Messrs. A. Cunningham, N. L. Elder, V. W. Brosman and R. Wise for making useful bird notes available, and to Mr. G. Caughley for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

REFERENCES

- CAUGHLEY, G., 1962: Habitat occupation of birds in a New Zealand high country drainage during the breeding season. *Emu* 62: 129-139.
- CHALLIES, C. N., 1962: Notes on the birds of the upper Ngaruroro catchment. *Notornis* 10: 118, 123-127.
- ELDER, N. L., 1965: Vegetation of the Ruahine Range: an introduction. *Trans. Roy. Soc. N.Z. Bot.* 3: 13-66.
- FLEMING, C. A., 1941: Summarised classified notes. *Annu. Rep. N.Z. Orn. Soc.* 1940-41, p. 4.
- FLEMING, C. A., 1950: New Zealand Flycatchers of the genus *Petroica* Swainson (Aves), Part II. *Trans. Roy. Soc. N.Z.* 78: 127-160.
- FLEMING, C. A. (Convenor), 1953: Checklist of New Zealand Birds. Published for the Ornithological Society of New Zealand by A. H. & A. W. Reed, Wellington.
- FORDHAM, R. A., 1961: Distribution of birds in the south-east Kaweka Range. *Notornis* 9: 113-119.
- SIBSON, R. B., 1958: Notes on the height reached by some species of birds on the mountains of the North Island. *Notornis* 7: 213-219.
- WODZICKI, K., 1950: Classified summarised notes. *N.Z. Bird Notes* 3: 214.