UNSUCCESSFUL SEARCH FOR THE AUCKLAND ISLANDS MERGANSER (Mergus australis)

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ABSTRACT

A search was made throughout the Auckland Islands between November 1972 and February 1973 during the joint N.Z. Government/U.S. National Science Foundation Expedition. Although efforts were particularly concentrated on the northern and more sheltered coast of Adams Island where the species was last collected in 1902, the regretful conclusion is that the population has indeed disappeared.

As one of only two species of mergansers known from the southern hemisphere, and the only one occurring below 30°S, the Auckland Islands Merganser is particularly interesting biologically and biogeographically. It was last seen and collected in 1902 by the Earl of Ranfurly on the Auckland Islands about 300 kilometers south of Stewart Island. Kear & Scarlett (1970) have given a comprehensive account of what is known of the species' general habits and range, and the distribution of museum specimens throughout the world. Gressitt & Wise (1971) and Taylor (1971), with only minor omissions, have given well-documented accounts of the flora and fauna of the Auckland Islands as well as a brief outline of their limited and sporadic human occupation.

From November 1972 to February 1973, a joint New Zealand Government and U.S. National Science Foundation expedition visited the archipelago (Fig. 1). During that time all of its islands were landed upon at least once, and perhaps more thoroughly explored by specialists in different biological disciplines than ever before. All those members of the party with at least some ornithological interests were alerted to record any sign that might indicate Mergansers. Because two of us were specifically concerned with birds of wetlands (Flightless Teal, *Anas a. aucklandica* — MWW, and the Snipe, *Coenocorypha a. aucklandica* — GRW), we found it convenient to frequently combine forces in search of the Merganser in every likely water body we encountered. Our main efforts were concentrated on Adams Island (10,120 ha), the only large island free of introduced mammals and virtually unmodified by man. Two much smaller islands, Disappointment (570 ha) and Ewing (80 ha), are also free of introduced mammals but lack suitable streams.

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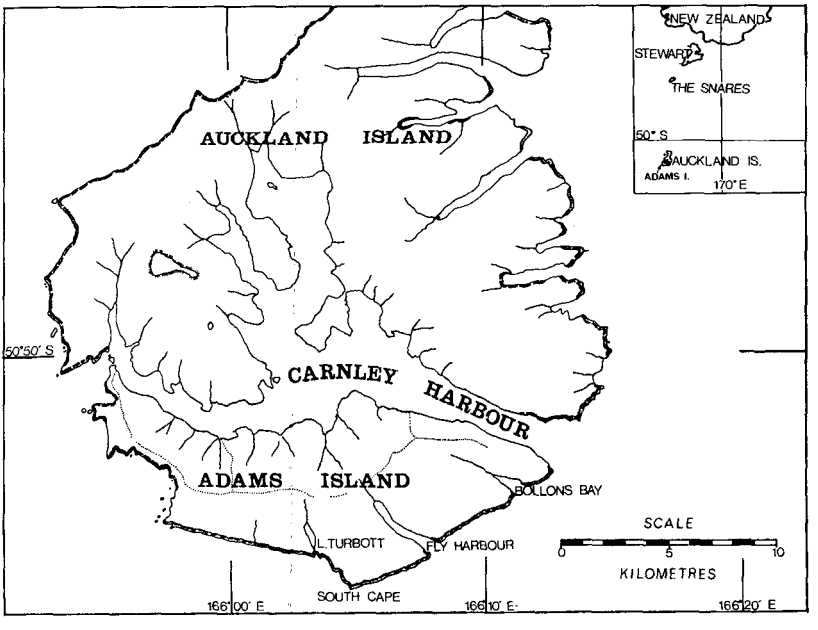
Auckland Island itself (460,000 ha) has numerous rivers and fiords as well as two sizeable lakes, but supports large populations of mice, cats, pigs and goats. Enderby Island (690 ha) is the most modified and, although it has a few slow-moving streams and tarns, it harbours mice, rabbits and cattle. Rabbits are the only terrestrial mammals on Rose Island (80 ha). Marine predators such as sealions, *Neophoca hookeri,* may be found almost anywhere in the Group and there are occasional colonies of fur seals, *Arctocephalus forsteri* — usually on Adams, Auckland and Disappointment Islands. Although we saw relatively little of the coast and interior of the main island, various colleagues covered much of its terrain, but reported nothing — which is hardly surprising in the face of its long occupation by cats and pigs.



On Adams Island there are 12 sizeable streams on the northern coast that drain into Carnley Harbour. There are also two inlets and one lake on the southern, precipitous coast. With one exception — that discharging into Bollons Bay, the southern streams are virtually cascades and unlikely, from what little we know of the habits of the Merganser, to be suitable for the species. We did not examine the Bollons Bay stream or Lake Turbott, but other members of the expedition did.

We concentrated our efforts on the northern and more sheltered coast of Adams Island where the species was last collected in 1902

and ascended all the likely streams for a considerable distance. One of us walked in the stream bed, and the other examined the wooded or tussock-covered boggy banks. Other members of the expedition covered a large part of the Island's uplands but reported nothing.

Had any Mergansers been occupying coastal waters of the Group, it seems unlikely that they could have gone undetected over the 3-month period of the expedition, as the various parties travelled extensively by sea and visited all harbours and inlets at least once. The precipitous and acutely-exposed western coast of Auckland Island itself was only cursorily examined, but the abrupt topography provides little suitable habitat for Mergansers or, indeed, other waterfowl.

We are forced to the regretful conclusion shared with others who have searched the Auckland Islands over the last 30 years that the population that occupied this extreme part of the species' range up to the beginning of the 20th century has indeed disappeared.

We should like to thank all those members of the Expedition who helped us in our search (especially B. D. Bell, R. Nilsson and R. Russ of the Wildlife Service) and Captain Alex Black of *Acheron* who took us, in all weathers, to most of the places we wanted to go. We are grateful to Miss Pauline Morse for preparing the map.

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