

SHORT NOTES

OBSERVATIONS OF KOKAKO COURTSHIP, HUNUA DECEMBER 1973

Little has been written about the courtship of the North Island Kokako (*Callaeas cinerea wilsoni*) since it was described by Buller (1888: 3). However, on 8 December 1973, we had the good fortune to observe the courtship ceremony of the Kokako in the Moumoukai Bush above Clevedon. The weather was fine and humid, with some patches of cloud, and a very light breeze from the south west. We were engaged in a routine survey of the birds in the Moumoukai Bush, and for the first time were using a small, portable cassette tape-recorder and a pre-recorded tape of the calls of Kokako in the area, made by C. R. Veitch. We set out at 1045 and, about half a mile into the bush, we met with considerable success, attracting a pair of Kokako with the tape. These birds remained in view for about 45 minutes, running about in the trees, searching diligently for the vocal but invisible intruder. As time was running short, we moved up the track another mile where we surprised a second pair which were moving about in the crown of a Toru (*Persoonia toru*) about 20' above the ground.

Initially, the pair took little notice of us but when we started the tape-recorder they became very excited. It was interesting to note that these birds were not as vocal as the "half-mile" pair, which responded to the tape with full song, mews and clucks. Instead, this pair reacted to the tape but did not look for it. The birds circled us a number of times in a clockwise direction, bounding through the trees, demonstrating remarkable agility and hardly deviating from a circular "path" of radius about 20 yards. They paused on the branch of a large Tawa tree, about 40 feet above the ground, clearly visible from our vantage point on the track about 20 yards away. The male mounted the female with a vigorous flapping of wings, uttering a bubbling call (similar to a smooth pebble dropped into a still pool) and clucking ecstatically during copulation. The birds resumed their path around us, returning to the same branch where a courtship display was performed. The pair faced each other on the branch and bowed to each other like a couple of elderly, grey-suited Continentals greeting each other in the street, repeated several times in quick succession. After almost completing another circuit, they paused in a large Tawa adjacent to that in which the courtship had been observed. Here, partially obscured from our view by vegetation, copulation occurred for a second time again with a vigorous flapping of wings (lasting in total about 10-15 seconds). After copulation, they circled us perhaps

twice more before vanishing into the wooded gully below. The Kokako appeared indifferent to human presence, reacting only to the taped calls. The "chase" through the trees appeared to be part of the ritual, and was conducted with what we could best describe as "joie de vivre."

A thorough search of the ridges in the vicinity on three subsequent weekends failed to find any trace of nesting activity.

REFERENCE

BULLER, W. L. 1888. A history of the birds of New Zealand. 2nd ed. Vol. I. Pp. lxxxiv + 1-250, text illus., pls I-XXIV. London: Privately published.

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A VARIABLE OYSTERCATCHER FAMILY AT WAIKANAE

For several years a pair of *Haematopus unicolor* ("reischeki") has been resident at Waikanae Estuary and has attempted to breed. After the nesting season, the pair is sometimes joined by immigrants (including a banded bird from Wellington Harbour) and occasionally another pair remains in the spring. The "home pair" consists of a completely black male and a smudgy intermediate pied female, the sexes being inferred from positions during attempts at copulation (CAF, 21 July 1972) and consistent behaviour when incubating eggs (MLF, 13 January 1974) or accompanying chicks (CAF, 27 December 1971). We cannot prove that the "home pair" has been unaltered since 1971 but we have no evidence to suggest a change.

The "home pair" had two downy running chicks on 12 December 1971 which both survived to fly and were both pied (27 December 1971); probably they would be "pied intermediate" in Baker's classification (1973). The following season, the home pair, or a pair with the same plumages, produced two pied downy chicks (first seen 18 November, MLF), about 5 inches tall on November 26 (CAF), seen again on December 9 (MLF) but reduced to one survivor on December 16 and 28, when it was fully fledged. These chicks (and especially the survivor) were exceptionally pied individuals, only distinguished from *H. finschi* by their larger size and by the behaviour of the parent pair towards them. In particular they had white shoulder patches and white rumps extending forward between the scapulars as in *H. finschi*. Neither of us has ever seen such extremely pied specimens of *H. unicolor* "reischeki." In 1973-74 the home pair failed to produce young.