A BUSHMAN'S SEVENTEEN YEARS OF NOTING BIRDS

PART B — NEW ZEALAND PIPIT, GREY WARBLER, NORTH ISLAND FANTAIL AND SILVEREYE

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NEW ZEALAND PIPIT *(Anthus novaeseelandiae novaeseelandiae)*

STATUS AND HABITS

Habitat

This pipit inhabits bare or partly bare ground from the seashore to above the tree line on the mountains but does not live in forest, dense scrub or rich pasture land. It particularly favours road cuttings in back country where motor traffic is scarce, also open tussock land, semi-desert flats and shingle and boulder riverbeds.

Flight

Its flight is similar to that of the Skylark but is more " bouncy " and jerky. It must travel long distances and at some height to get to some of the places where it is found but it does not soar like the lark.

Nesting

The site is usually on the upper edge or the side of a bank or steep slope, in rough tufty vegetation, often by a quiet road with little traffic. The nest may be from 6 to 30 cm down in the growth but not partly sunk into the ground like that of the Skylark. It will breed from just above high tide mark to well above the tree line on the mountains.

Food

It appears to eat only insects, grubs and other small life. It will sometimes leap a foot or so in the air when catching flies. The human being is quickly recognised as an agent for the provision of food. As I walked to work one would go along with me and shriek until I put down my tools and chopped a rotten log for it, when I would leave it gorging itself on the various small creatures exposed. Two pipits, with up to four chaffinches and two hedgesparrows would attend me at work each day for grubs, Huhu *(Prionoplus reticularis)* and others. The Pipit cannot deal with this large grub unless it is broken up for it but the Chaffinch can do so. When the steam hauler was bringing out logs through the cutover it would be followed by Pipits and when it was stopped for the " ropey " to change the block they would hop onto the log for food and even follow it right to the mill. It will work along the timber tracks into the heavy podocarp forest but retreats to the open for the night.

In the back country of the Waiau it was found in the odd rough clearing in the forest to which it had probably penetrated by following up the shingle beds of the larger streams in pursuit of flies. It may possibly fly directly over the forest.

Song

The very sharp chirp, rising to a small shriek when uttered urgently, is the common call. The full song appears to be seldom heard. I have heard it only once, in the hills of Moumoukai in the Hunua Ranges but never in all the hundreds I have had in Tihoi and Minginui areas or elsewhere. Reg. Bell of Pirongia (pers. comm.) has heard it only twice, once from the top of a big stump in a clearing on Pirongia Mountain and once from the ground. A. Blackburn (pers. comm.) has known only one. It was on Hen Island (Taranga) and flew over the sea from the boulders singing heartily. H. R. McKenzie (pers. comm.) has heard it only once, singing from the top of a bracken frond on Moumoukai Hill Road on the edge of the Hunua Ranges. We four elderly observers have been familiar with the bird all our lives so it seems that song is rare indeed.

ANALYSIS OF MONTHLY CHARTS

(Brackets = total birds seen plus estimate of birds heard only).

Proportion seen to heard: 1 seen to 1 heard and not seen.

TIHOI

The total of birds seen from May 1944 to April 1946 was 1280 (2560).

Count days per month averaged 25.4; days seen 9.7; days not seen 15.7.

Daily counts of birds ranged from 0 to 80. (Some very high counts on tussock country).

Count days totalled 609 and the total birds seen 1280, giving an average of 2.1 (4.2) per day.

Notes on Analysis

It appears odd that I had 80 in one day and that the daily average was only 2.1. The high counts were on days when I was not in the bush, as in May when I would be shooting over the tussock land. Taking it all round Tihoi (and Arataki) kept remarkably even monthly numbers, giving no indication of seasonal movement.

MINGINUI

The total of birds seen from part 1946 to part 1961 was 7789 (15,578).

Count days per month for 170 months averaged 24.9; days seen 11.4; days not seen 13.5.

Daily counts of birds seen ranged from 0 to 50.

Count days totalled 4239 and the total birds seen 7789, giving an average of 1.8 (3.6) per count day.

Notes on Analysis

Here, as with Tihoi, I saw the largest numbers when not in or about the bush. Most were on the river flats when I went shooting and fishing. Another prolific area was the mile or so I walked when working at the Mangamati bush through the favoured tussock and small scattered tea-tree. When working in or about the Minginui bush there would be only the few along the roads through the cutover and often none at all. There was no noticeable fluctuation in numbers.

Throughout the years the Pipit seemed to be declining but my visits to its favourite haunts were so irregular that I could not prove this. Before European settlement its chief enemy would be the New Zealand Falcon, which takes a heavy toll. The Harrier may have taken a few chicks and the introduced Polynesian rat *(Rattus exulans)* may have taken eggs, but now it has to suffer from cats, stoats, polecats, hedgehogs, the ship rat *(Rattus rattus)* and, since 1958 at Minginui, the Myna. Another predator, the Australian Magpie, had not arrived in the area in 1961.

WAIAU

The total of birds seen on hunting trips from 1946 to 1961 (from 1 to 24 days per month for parts of 47 months was 85 (170).

Count days per month averaged 5; days birds seen 1.3; days not seen 3.7.

Daily counts of birds ranged from 0 to 42.

Count days totalled 235 and the total birds seen 85, giving an average of 0.36 (0.72) per count day.

Notes on Analysis

The extremely small average count per day in the Waiau was due to my hunting in the bush and finding only a few pipits in some clear spaces.

GREY WARBLER *(Gerygone igata igata)*

STATUS AND HABITS

Habitat

The Grey Warbler, one of the most common native birds, has adapted itself to introduced flora in New Zealand and can be seen as readily in gardens, hedges and exotic trees as in its native bush and scrub. It is usually the first to respond to a lure call.

Flight

As it moves quickly through branches and leaves it flicks from side to side and is seldom seen to be still. When seeking insect life on small twigs it often hovers somewhat like a hummingbird. In sustained flight it dips very little. In courtship or play its evolutions are extremely volatile.

Nesting

The hanging domed nest with the hole in the side is well known and may be found from 30 cm to 6 m or so above the ground in moderately thick cover. Two broods in a season is usual. The first

brood escapes the Shining Cuckoo but the second is often parasitised by that bird and the eggs or tiny chicks destroyed, ejected by the young cuckoo. However it maintains its numbers without apparent decline or fluctuation.

Food

Grubs, caterpillars and insects and their eggs or larvae form its diet. The taking of any fruits, or flora of any kind, if known, would be rare.

Song

Its shrill trilling, sometimes described as cricket-like, is almost its only utterance and it has the unusual habit of breaking it off suddenly when it is apparently not complete. In anger or distress it makes a shrill twittering, which may change into agitated song.

ANALYSIS OF MONTHLY CHARTS

(Brackets = total birds seen plus estimate of birds heard only).

Proportion seen to heard: 1 seen to 3 heard and not seen.

TIHOI

The total birds seen from May 1944 to April 1946 was 2562 (10,248).

Count days per month averaged 25.4; days seen 20.8; days not seen 4.6.

Daily counts of birds ranged from 0 to 21.

Count days totalled 609 and the total birds seen 2562, giving an average of 4.2 (16.8) per count day.

Notes on Analysis

These figures, taken from the monthly chart, indicate an even spread throughout the year. The species does not flock. Numbers are up somewhat in the spring but are quite well maintained in comparison with other birds throughout the winter. G. E. Sopp and H. R. McKenzie (pers. comm.) have reported that after a heavy snowstorm and gale in the winter of 1956 in the Aniwaniwa Valley, Lake Waikaremoana, the Silvereye and the Rifleman were almost wiped out, the Fantail and Whitehead reduced by c50% and the hardy little Grey Warbler apparently not reduced at all.

MINGINUI

The total birds seen was 14,843 (59,372).

Count days per month for 170 months averaged 24.9; days seen 22.5; days not seen 2.4.

Daily counts of birds ranged from 0 to 20.

Count days totalled 4239 and the total birds seen 14,843, giving an average of 3.5 (14) per count day.

Notes on Analysis

The notes in regard to the spread throughout the year at Tihoi will apply also to Minginui.

WAIAU

The total birds seen on hunting trips to the back country from 1946 to 1961 (from 1 to 24 days per month for parts of 47 months) was 2716 (10,864).

Count days per month averaged 5; days seen 4.9; days not seen 0.1.

Daily counts of birds ranged from 0 to 25.

Count days totalled 235 and the total birds seen 2716, giving an average of 11.6 (46.4) per count day.

Notes on Analysis

It will be noted that the top counts per day for Tihoi, Minginui and Waiau were 21, 20 and 25, while the averages per count day were 4.2, 3.5 and 11.6. The reason for the high average of 11.6 for Waiau was that, although I did not see more than 25 on any one day I did see more per day through being so much more on the move while hunting and fishing. When working I covered very much less ground.

NORTH ISLAND FANTAIL *(Rhipidura fuliginosa placabilis)*

STATUS AND HABITS

Habitat

This dainty little bird, equally at home in native and exotic growth, lives here in deep forest, second-growth bush, scrub and rough clearings. In winter it flocks loosely in the more open but less exposed areas, as about Minginui Village. In heavy cold wind it keeps tightly to low growth but in fine weather in winter it is partial to the open streambeds where insects are plentiful, while in summer it frequents the tree tops largely, when not engaged in breeding.

Flight

The flight is quick, fluttering and gyratory, but when moving a distance, as across a field, it flies directly with its tail folded in like an ordinary bird and held straight out behind it. Strangely enough, when it moults it can gyrate just as well with no tail at all. The moult here is in June and July, also partly into August, a very cold part of the year.

Nesting

The nest, with its well known " tail," is built fairly low down, often on a slender branchlet which waves up and down with the wind. I have seen the Fantail on the ground gathering small rootlets for binding into the nest with cobweb. The bird on the nest watches an approach very closely but sits tightly and can sometimes be touched. In one case I noted a nest with three eggs in the operational area of a Long-tailed Cuckoo but when I returned a little later the Fantails had left and the eggs were gone. The cuckoo or a rat may have taken them.

Food

The atmosphere largely governs feeding. As the sun gets stronger the Fantail goes even to the tops of the highest trees, 46 m or more. As the sun sinks the bird keeps above the upward moving shade where the insects are still active. When the barometric pressure is high the insects are high and when it is low they are low. Feeding is mostly the taking of insects in the air but it will search under leaves or twist round under branches to get caterpillars or some such. I have seen it picking up insects from the ground and also grit from a sandy patch. It sometimes follows Whiteheads and other feeding flocks of birds for the tiny insects they disturb.

One I watched feeding its young out on the edge of a tractor road. It brought along a large blowfly which one of the chicks could not take so it put its foot on it, pulled half of it off for the chick and ate the other half itself.

Song

The song is a squeaky chatter, not very musical and is made from a perch. A single " pip " is often used when hunting.

ANALYSIS OF MONTHLY CHARTS

(Brackets = total birds seen plus estimate of birds heard only).

Proportion seen to heard: 1 seen to c10 heard but not seen.

TIHOI

The total birds seen for the two years May 1944 to April 1946 was 3071 (33,781).

Count days per month averaged 25.3; days birds seen 21.8; days not seen 3.5.

Daily counts of birds ranged from 0 to 26.

Count days totalled 609 and the total birds seen 3071, giving an average of 5 (55) per count day.

Notes on Analysis

It will be noted that " days not seen " per month is 3.5 whereas for Minginui it was 1.2 and Waiau 0 (almost). The difference was due to my having to cross so much tussock country when going to and from work at Tihoi. Where there are no shrubs or trees there will be hardly any fantails. This also accounts for the ratio of " daily counts of birds seen," 0 to 26 for Tihoi. 0 to 50 for Minginui and 0 to 40 for Waiau.

MINGINUI

The total birds seen from 1946 to 1961 was 34,705 (381,755).

Count days per month for 170 months averaged 24.9; days birds seen 23.9; days not seen 1.0.

Daily counts of birds seen ranged from 0 to 50.

Count days totalled 4239 and the total birds seen 34,705, giving an average of 8.2 (90.2) per count day.

Notes on Analysis

The " days not seen," i.e. 1.0 per month, would be accounted for mostly by some tussock being crossed on the way to the Mangamati Bush. The route from my hut at Prentice Bros' mill to the Minginui Bush had fantails practically all the way.

The high figure of 50 for Minginui was due to sunny winter weather on the open river flats with their odd hawthorn trees, patches of scrub and side gullies of light bush.

WAIAU

The total birds seen on hunting trips for parts of 47 months was 3814 (41,954).

Count days per month averaged 6; days seen 6.

Daily counts of birds seen ranged from 0 to 40.

Total count days were 235 and the total birds seen 3814, the average being 16.2 (178.2) per count day.

Notes on Analysis

The " days not seen," i.e. 0, the average 16.2 and the top count 40, give a true showing, partly in summer but mostly in autumn, of the heavy bush, with odd scrub-edged small clearings and the upper bushed river courses. On only 2 days of the 235 count days were none seen.

SILVEREYE *(Zosterops lateralis lateralis)*

STATUS AND HABITS

Habitat

As the Silvereye ranges from sea level to the tops of the Urewera mountains its wandering habits make it somewhat difficult to study. It is at home in tall forest, scrub, hedges and city gardens but makes little use of pasture land. Fairly low tight growth is preferred for sleeping quarters.

Flight

Undulating less than the finches it moves through the trees and bushes in pairs, small parties, and, often, in flocks so large that the birds cannot all be seen at once, making counting difficult. They proceed by leapfrogging, continually overtaking and passing each other, keeping in touch by a " peep " call. I have not seen sustained flight at any great height or for a long distance in this area though of course its ability to cover long distances is well known.

Nesting

Here they do not nest much over 488 m, building their flimsy home low down in small trees or shrubs. Breeding is very successful as indeed it needs to be to make up the heavy losses of this species through predation and sometimes bad weather. Considerable losses are caused by the young exploding from the nest when disturbed.

There have been some years in which, for no apparent reason none bred about Minginui and it was not even seen.

Food

Hunting for insects and their eggs and larvae, especially scale insects in season, is busily carried out among leaves and branches. Though the Silvereye has not a brush tongue, nectar is avidly sought. Fruits are taken by swallowing the small ones whole and pecking large ones. Fats and table scraps are appreciated, but it does not approach humans for food in the wild as do the New Zealand robins.

Easily approached, it was at times exploited for food by the Maori. When big flocks were feeding on a low shrub, such as *Coprosma tenuifolia,* common in the beech forest, with its massed bright fruits, he would knock the birds down with a stick, often two or three at a time. Certainly this was true of parts of the Lake Waikaremoana area.

Song

The full song, in spring and summer, is a trilling warbling which may be said to resemble that of the Blackbird, but in miniature. The " peep " is used a great deal for keeping in touch. It is a delightful experience to hear the whisper song, audible at only a few feet. One may wonder where the sound is coming from and then find the bird almost within touch.

ANALYSIS OF MONTHLY CHARTS

(Brackets = total birds seen plus estimate of birds heard only).

Proportion seen to heard: 1 seen to 3 heard and not seen.

TIHOI

The total of birds seen from May 1944 to April 1946 was 16,413 (65,652).

Count days per month averaged 25.4; days seen 21.9; days not seen 3.5.

Daily counts of birds ranged from 0 to 230.

Count days totalled 609 and the total birds seen 16,413, giving an average of 27 (108) per count day.

Notes on Analysis

The charts for the 24 months at Tihoi show peaks of 96 and 50 per day for the two April months and from there they scale down to 13 and 5 per day for the two December months, then climb back up to the April peak. It may be that the April peak, consisting largely of young birds, is formed by a movement down from the higher country of the northern end of the Hauhungaroa Range, numbers then decreasing through the death of old birds, plus the weaker young ones, from May to August. The continued decline from October to December could be due to scattering to breed, followed by the rise from January to April due to their flocking to the lower levels again.

However a period of two years is not enough to enable definite conclusions to be drawn. In the light of later experience at Minginui the returning birds may not have been the same ones.

MINGINUI

The total of birds seen from part 1946 to part 1961 was 85,078 (340,312).

Count days per month for 170 months averaged 24.9; days seen 16; days not seen 8.9.

Daily counts of birds ranged from 0 to 400.

Count days totalled 4239 and the total birds seen 85,078, giving an average of 20 (80) per count day.

Notes on Analysis

Minginui at first followed the pattern of Tihoi. Throughout 1946 to 1953 and again in 1955 the peak was mostly in March-April, numbers then descending usually to almost nil by December, gaining a little in January and building up again to the peak figures for March and April. These were the " good " years, one of which, 1950, as an example, is shown in Table 1.

1954 had the usual numbers from January to July, after which there was not one bird seen to the end of December. 1955 was normal but 1956, 1957 and 1958 were just as bad as 1954, i.e., no Silvereye being seen for the four or five months of all the spring and early summer. These I am calling the " bad " years. 1956 is given below as one of these. All of these bad years had high counts from February to June, which might suggest either emigration or a high winter mortality as a result of a very high population level.

1959 and 1960 were patchy but altogether much lower than the 1946-1953 years, perhaps indicating a general decline, though they were quite good from February to May. 1959 is shown in Table 1 as one of the two patchy years. It was noted that the figures per count day for any one month vary greatly from year to year. This applies also to the years not shown in the table.

TABLE 1 — Monthly averages of birds seen per count day.

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
1950	16.3	21.8	18.5	19.7	37.3	32.0	31.0	18.7	6.1	6.6	2.1	2.5
1956	4.9	12.1	59.0	77.0	26.0	10.0	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
1959	0.9	49.5	79.0	105.0	11.0	3.1	0.4	0.8	1.2	0.1	0.07	0.0

The breeding season figures of the earlier years are what could be expected but what of the barren ones, when birds were not even seen ? I certainly did not miss counting them. It seems almost impossible that they should stay for winter and spring higher up than Minginui. Careful study of the daily temperature charts I kept does not seem to account for rises and falls in annual or seasonal numbers.

It is particularly notable that there was a complete absence at Minginui for from four to five months in the winter and spring (including the breeding season) for four of the later years and an almost complete absence for the same period for the last two complete years.

The only simple explanation for the whole confused record is that the species can be strongly nomadic regardless of climate or season so that the population of an area like Minginui may be continually changed, even when numbers seem reasonably stable. A. Blackburn (pers. comm.) has drawn attention to the fact that large and small flocks of Silvereye pay short visits to offshore islands, such as Cuvier.

Snow occurs at Minginui at up to —6.7°C (44°F) and sometimes is followed by up to —29.4°C (—21°F) of frost. Stormy cold wet weather can be just as serious. The Silvereyes driven down by the snow suffer a great deal from snow blindness and it is pitiful to see them wobbling weakly around. Some recover but most just died, providing a great feast for cats and other predators. The bush roads are lined with the little green bodies. When such disasters occur re-population must come about largely through flocks moving in nomadically from elsewhere, not necessarily from any one direction.

WAIAU

The total of birds seen on hunting trips from 1946 to 1961 (from 1 to 24 days per month for parts of 47 months) was 17,482 (69,928).

Count days per month averaged 5; days birds seen 4.5; days not seen 0.5.

Daily counts of birds seen ranged from 0 to 600.

Total count days were 235 and the total birds seen 17,482, giving an average of 74.4 (297.6).

Notes on Analysis

The total of birds seen is high in relation to the figures for Minginui as most of my hunting trips occurred in the months when the Silvereye is most numerous. Odd trips later in the year produced very little in comparison.

REFERENCE

ST. PAUL, R. 1975. A Bushman's seventeen years of noting birds, Introduction and Part A (Bellbird and Tui). Notornis 22 (2): 122-130, 1 fig.

ERRATA FOR PART A

Page 127, Minginui, para. 2, should read: " Count days per month for 170 months averaged 20.5; days birds seen 19.5; days not seen 1.0."

Page 129, Minginui, para. 2, should read: " Count days per month for 170 month averaged 20.1; days birds seen 20.0; days not seen 0.1."