

# NOTORNIS

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## A BUSHMAN'S SEVENTEEN YEARS OF NOTING BIRDS

PART F [CONCLUSION OF SERIES]—  
NOTES ON OTHER NATIVE BIRDS

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(Edited by H. R. McKenzie)

Although some of the native birds of this Part have been charted fully they are discussed more briefly because they show little or no variation seasonally or annually, are in small numbers throughout, or have appeared irregularly. Mention is made of birds no longer present in the area and some which may have once been present. Evidence for the latter was hard to get because "old hands" did not retire in the area. Ned August, an elderly Maori, was my only reliable personal informant about earlier times.

### FURTHER BUSH BIRDS PRESENT

#### NORTH ISLAND KIWI (*Apteryx australis mantelli*)

Proportion seen to heard: 1 seen to over 50 heard but not seen.

This flightless bird would once have been very common here and quite a healthy remnant remains in heavy and light bush and sometimes in scrub or fern. Since it is nocturnal it is very seldom seen. Its enemies here are mostly pig-dogs and the traps of possum hunters.

I have not observed its hunting except to notice where it has been boring for worms and scratching the ground with its feet. Its food is mostly worms, grubs and fallen berries.

The call of the male is a high "kwee-kwee-kwee" repeated ten or more times, getting faster and more shrill. The female's notes are gruff, low key, slower and fewer in number than those of the male. When camping out in the bush one will sometimes hear the snuffling noise which the Kiwi makes when questing for food in the dark.



FIGURE 1 — Robert ("Bob") St. Paul.

NEW ZEALAND FALCON (*Falco novaeseelandiae*)

Proportion seen to heard: 1 seen to 3 or 4 heard but not seen.

This endemic falcon has the usual characteristics of the family, being noted for its fearlessness and hunting prowess. Though admired for these it is disliked for its taking poultry and domestic birds. Bushmen and hunters have often shot it here and elsewhere because of its ruthless predation on other native birds. It is now rare in most parts and territorially is fairly sedentary, though odd ones will at times wander a great distance within New Zealand. It is mostly a bird of the forest but occurs often in adjacent open country and even in towns. At Tihoi my top count in a day was 3 seen, once only. Minginui had top counts of 6, 5 and 4 seen. On hunting trips to Waiau, Parahaki and Upper Whirinaki on three trips of up to eight days each counts were 1 to 5, 1 to 4 and 2 to 4, but other trips there yielded none or just one or two on odd days. I would have heard more, of course, as the sharp calls carry a long way.

The Falcon has a flapping flight when going in a straight line and it is quite fast. If it thinks it sees something it will circle two or three times, then fly on, but if quarry is sighted it goes into a lightning swoop.

It gives away the locality of its nest by the fuss it makes. I have seen the odd nest away up in a rhyolite cliff, but it will often nest here on the ground on a steep slope or a hole in a rock, in epiphytic growth and sometimes in a hollow branch of a tree.

The food of the Falcon is mostly birds, taken alive. I have not seen it eating carrion and have heard of its doing so only once. I have not known it to return to a kill of the day before. When nesting near open country it feeds its young largely on the New Zealand Pipit.

It is an inveterate hunter. Sometimes, though not very often, it will chase birds for fun, not trying to catch them, but usually it is in deadly earnest and displays a lust for killing. When hunting the pigeon it flies along the face of the bush to frighten one out, then comes down like a shot from a gun and strikes. When working on pigeons it will kill all it can find. One man told me he knew one bird to strike down seven in one morning. Killing Starlings is one of its favourite pastimes. There was one three-mile stretch of bush edge where Starlings nested every year. As the adult Starlings came out from the nests, heading down to the open for food, the Falcon would swoop and knock one out, then go back and kill the next one, five or six birds one after the other. It did not eat them. It was just for the sake of killing, as with the stoat. Pack hunting is sometimes used, two or three birds combining to make a kill. I saw one following a pigeon through the trees while two others flew above waiting for a chance to strike. The strike is lightning fast. One following through the trees needs only the clear space afforded by a

narrow truck road to hit and kill a pigeon. The clenched feet, or the heel, not the claws, are used for this, but small prey may be killed in the air either with the claws or the heel, or with the claws only if the prey is on the ground.

A repetitive "kek-kek-kek" of a cruising bird builds up into a scream when it is chasing anything. From a perch it will call angrily or agitatedly if someone is near the nest.

Few birds will attack the Falcon but the Kaka and the Tui will do so if it comes near their nesting place.

#### MOREPORK (*Ninox novaeseelandiae novaeseelandiae*)

Proportion seen to heard: 1 seen to 50 or more heard but not seen.

The Morepork may now be the only native owl extant in New Zealand. It is relatively plentiful throughout the country and is well established as it lives in exotic as well as in native tree growth.

The territorial habits here are puzzling. Three or four pairs may be found in a small area with no others for some distance in the surrounding bush, yet they do not form even small flocks. In the Waiau River area I located from one spot eight pairs calling, some appearing to answer the others.

The flight is of even medium speed when travelling along but when in a hurry it can turn at a sharp angle to come down onto prey in a flash. Its wings make no noise at all and it can be startling when it ghostily passes closely in the near-dark. In the mill yard near my hut a strong electric light attracted many moths and other insects. A Morepork, gyrating crazily, would make a harvest of these, while the little bats worked just clear of it.

Breeding usually takes place in a hollow tree, but also in odd places, such as in a clump of *Astelia* on a tree. Two eggs, or sometimes three, are laid. In 1915 I found three chicks in a hollow hinau tree at Moumcukai, in the Hunua Ranges.

I have never known it to attempt to hunt in daylight, not even in the darkest bush gullies. I had the unusual experience of seeing odd ones on the bush edge sunning themselves between 3 and 4 p.m. on cold trosty days in June 1955.

The food consists of any insect at all practically, from the largest to the quite small, also rats and mice, which are killed with the feet, slit open, neatly skinned and consumed. The rat tails and hind legs are left, still joined together. The skin seems to be swallowed sometimes. Some birds are taken in the bush but not many.

The main call is the one known as "morepork," but this really is more like "kwawk-kwawk," with numerous variations. There are about eight fairly definite calls but every one of them has variations so that it is difficult to define them. One bird will sometimes appear to answer another at quite a distance, apparently not a pair. It can be heard at night all the year but particularly from early spring on to

late summer or autumn. Occasionally calls will come from deep dark gullies, which are favoured for roosting during the day. Calling is particularly noticeable when rain is approaching.

Small birds do not like the Morepork and it is vigorously mobbed by Tui, Bellbird, Whitehead, and, to a lesser extent the Grey Warbler. They make a great fuss and noise and go quite close to their enemy, which is at a disadvantage in the daylight and does not retaliate. Introduced birds, such as the Blackbird, join in to some extent. However, all soon tire and leave it or else it flies away to a darker place.

### BIRDS OF THE RIVERS AND STREAMS

#### BLACK SHAG (*Phalacrocorax novaehollandiae*)

This large shag occurs fairly regularly in small numbers in the streams at Tihoi and Arataki, the rivers at Minginui, and, sparingly, the bush streams of the Waiau area. I heard of only one record of nesting which was of two or three nests in the Longfern area on a tributary of the Whirinaki River.

#### LITTLE SHAG (*Phalacrocorax melanoleucos brevirostris*)

A few of this species came to the main rivers. Odd parties of up to 16 could have been Little Black Shag (*P. tenuirostris*) but I did not ascertain this.

#### BLACK SWAN (*Cygnus atratus*)

One party of five seen flying across the Whirinaki valley. It is possible that swan and other waterbirds occurred occasionally on Lake Arahaki but I did not find any there. This lake would be dry for long periods. The bushy edges are not suitable for water and wading birds.

#### PARADISE DUCK (*Tadorna variegata*)

Two were seen at Tihoi in 1944. At and about Minginui scattered pairs and small parties occurred along the larger streams and sometimes a little way up into the bush. The highest count in a day was 9. One nest was found.

#### GREY DUCK (*Anas superciliosa superciliosa*)

The Grey Duck was not plentiful but had a wide distribution, being found at and about Tihoi and from the Whirinaki River right back to the streams of the Parahaki and Waiau areas. Few cases of breeding were noted. I saw a female calling down her newly hatched young from a nest in a clump of astelia c 12 m up in a tree (St. Paul 1956).

#### BLUE DUCK (*Hymenolaimus malacorhynchus*)

Proportion seen to heard: 6 seen to 1 heard and not seen.

This is a bird of the upper streams mostly but sometimes it comes down to the main rivers. Up to five at once were seen on

the Mangakino River at Arataki but it was seldom noted there. The population at Minginui and the whole Waiau area was about 40 but a deer culler shot nearly all of them. Some of the few that were left in the eastern part spread back later to the Upper Whirinaki Stream. It is thrilling to hear the whistled "Whio" of the male. The female call of "krrr" is something like that of the female Kiwi.

#### BIRDS OF SWAMP AND DAMP COVER

##### AUSTRALIAN BROWN BITTERN (*Botaurus stellaris poiciloptilus*)

One came most years to a small swamp by the Whirinaki River to moult in May-June. No call was made.

##### SPOTLESS CRAKE (*Porzana tabuensis plumbea*)

The only record I have is of a cat taking six in the Whirinaki valley.

##### PUKEKO (*Porphyrio porphyrio melanotus*)

Only a few were scattered along the Whirinaki valley. The terrain is not very suitable for the species.

##### PIED STILT (*Himantopus himantopus leucocephalus*)

Up to four seen on the Whirinaki riverbed but very rare. The small swamps here are not of the type it prefers.

##### NORTH ISLAND FERNBIRD (*Bowdleria punctata vealeae*)

This furtive little bird, with its down-hanging frayed looking tail, is sometimes plentiful, sometimes scarce in the Whirinaki and Minginui River areas. Usually it is in rushes, low shrubbery, sedges, or a mixture of these. In bracken fern (*Pteridium aquilinum esculentum*) I have found it on the top of a ridge, but stranger still, living in pure bracken fern across the Minginui River from my hut on a steep, wet, almost vertical bank about 16 m high. I have not seen it in the bush.

The Fernbird seldom flies more than 45 m. I have seen one fly that distance across a river. By the way it transfers from one isolated habitat to another it must, like the rails, fly much further at night.

The usual call is a sharp "u-tik," each syllable uttered by a different bird, sometimes, but rarely, reversed to "tik-u." Single sharp "tiks" are common, especially at evening.

##### AUSTRALASIAN HARRIER (*Circus approximans gouldi*)

The Harrier is included in this section because it relies on swamps so much for nesting, sleeping and hunting.

Proportion seen to heard: 6 seen to 1 heard and not seen.

Daily counts of birds ranged from 0 to 4 mostly, the highest daily counts being 12, 7, 7, 6, 6 and 5. Counts could be exaggerated owing to the Harrier's habit of making more than one flight cycle in one day.

This, the only representative of the Accipitridae we have in New Zealand, though common in so many parts is not plentiful in such habitat as the thick forest of the Urewera ranges. It is easily observed owing to its being large and often high-flying. No set seasonal pattern is revealed by my notes. Very few sightings were made on hunting trips deep into the ranges but the more open areas were quite fruitful.

Several flight cycles are made over the same course in a day and cover a considerable number of flight miles. Special spots are visited frequently in the Whirinaki valley, say at a swamp to look for Pukeko, or where a marshy pool allows the bird to have a wash.

Breeding is inhibited in the area because swamps are absent in the bush ranges and are few and small in the open valleys. I have heard of only one local nest, in bracken fern, away from the bush. I have not seen food being carried as if to a sitting mate, though most seen are adult birds.

Hunting over the bush canopy does not seem to be very profitable but Starling nests in epiphytic clumps of growth on big trees at or near the bush edge are particularly vulnerable to attack. The open riverbeds and a few small natural clearings in the bush provide opportunity for catching any kind of rodent or a sick young bird. The tussock lands and scrub areas of Tihoi provide good hunting. The open flats along the Whirinaki River, with single hawthorn trees and rough scrub have for prey exotic birds and other animals as well as the native species. The main road, Route 38 and the Minginui Road provide car-killed birds. Much time is spent watching for frogs in the small swampy places and a bird will spend hours watching for mice in patches of grass. All catching is done with the foot. Carrion is appreciated by the Harrier as well as living prey. Hunters provide much carrion in the form of deer and pig carcasses and offal. Such is usually revealed when a bird is seen taking off from a clear space, such as a river-bed.

The calls vary quite a bit. In the spring, starting in August, it gives a piercing whistle each time it goes round when looping the loop. Of the ordinary calls one is like an exaggerated chirp. There is no sustained calling, nor does it have a hunting call like the New Zealand Falcon.

The Harrier has to give way to the Falcon or Bush Hawk, though the latter is only half its size. When the Falcon swoops the Harrier turns upside down and extends its armoured feet. The Falcon then sheers off but returns and attacks again and again until the Harrier retreats. The aerobatics they display at such times are marvellous. Native birds which mob the Harrier are the Tui and Bellbird, in the breeding season. Smaller birds do not join in.

## BIRDS PERHAPS FORMERLY PRESENT

WHITE HERON (*Egretta alba modesta*)

Best (1925: 58) wrote "... a pond or lagoon at Manu-ohu was famous as a breeding place of the Kotuku." This place is a little north of my boundary, Route 38, so the birds could easily have visited the Whirinaki riverbeds in my area.

BROWN TEAL (*Anas aucklandica chlorotis*)

Although the Urewera is not ideal country for the Brown Teal it should be safe to assume that it would have occurred in some parts, it being a very adaptable species.

KAKAPO (*Strigops habroptilus*)

The latest report I have of the Kakapo was made by G. M. Maning (pers. comm.). Near the top of the Huiarau Range, at Christmas 1927, he had a clear view of one standing on a log. It scuttled away on the ground into the bush.

In 1950 I was told by Ned August, a Maori bushman, that when his grandfather was with the rebel chief, Te Kooti, in the Waiau, in the Huiarau Range, their main food was the Kakapo (St. Paul 1951: 52).

Best (1925: 296) stated that the Kakapo abounded in the Parahaki district. He mentioned (p. 17) a party of Maoris setting out from Te Whaiti to hunt Kakapo, being caught by an enemy tribe, killed and eaten.

RED-CROWNED PARAKEET (*Cyanoramphus novaeseelandiae novaeseelandiae*)

I did not see this species either at Tihoi or in the whole of the Minginui area. The nearest reported occurrence I had was from G. E. Sopp (pers. comm.) who saw a pair near the shore of Lake Waikaremoana, about 1957. It could perhaps have once lived in the podocarp forest about Minginui.

NORTH ISLAND LAUGHING OWL (*Sceloglaux albifacies rufifacies*)

Several writers, the first of whom seems to have been Oliver (1955: 437), have stated that, according to information from Maoris, this bird was once common in the Urewera country, which includes Minginui, Parahaki, Waiau and Upper Whirinaki areas. A. Blackburn (pers. comm.) heard it in 1925 at Wairauamoana, the south-western arm of Lake Waikaremoana.

NORTH ISLAND BUSH WREN (*Xenicus longipes stokesi*)

Several sightings have been reported in the neighbourhood but none has been confirmed. The first I have of these is by Sir Robert Falla (pers. comm.) in 1925, at the top of the Huiarau Range on Route 38, which is on the boundary of my area. Others were in



the Lake Waikaremoana area, viz, at Lake Waikare-iti (Edgar 1949: 172); in the Aniwanui valley, several wrens, larger than rifleman, seen up to 1955 by G. E. Sopp (pers. comm.); 2 seen on 2/5/55 by G. E. Sopp and W. P. Mead (pers. comm.); 1 well seen on 17/11/55 by H. R. McKenzie (pers. comm.). These sightings were so close to the Parahaki side of the Huiarau Range that the bird could well have been present there at the same time and perhaps in the Waiau catchment also.

#### NORTH ISLAND WEKA (*Gallirallus australis greyi*)

It is generally recognised that this Weka was once present throughout the North Island. Recent liberations have shown that it thrives in neighbouring country so it could hardly have been absent here.

#### NORTH ISLAND SADDLEBACK (*Philisturnus carunculatus rufusater*)

This was once a widespread bird of the bush and may have lived at Tihoi, Minginui and Waiau. The nearest unconfirmed report was of two seen at Okataina. The last confirmed sighting on the mainland of the North Island was of a pair seen in February 1935 at the Kopuapounamu River beneath Raukumara Peak, in the northern part of the Raukumara Range, towards East Cape, in similar country to that of my area here (Fleming 1939-40). Best (1925: 303) mentioned Pari-tieke, the name of a place on the Manga-o-hau Stream, some miles north of Route 38. This place name may indicate the presence of the Tieke there at some time.

#### HUIA (*Heteralocha acutirostris*)

Phillips (1963) discussed the several reports or possible sightings in the Waikaremoana-Urewera section. I have not any other evidence.

#### NORTH ISLAND KOKAKO (*Callaeas cinerea wilsoni*)

I did not see or hear a Kokako in the years that I worked at Tihoi and Arataki. This is remarkable since Pureora, only approximately 16 km away was, and still is, one of the best places to observe this bird. I would certainly not have missed it as I have known it well ever since my early childhood. It was once plentiful in the Whakatane and other river valleys towards Bay of Plenty. The Whakatane and its upper tributaries have their sources south of Route 38 so it is highly probable that the Kokako would have extended into my area.

#### NORTH ISLAND THRUSH (*Turnagra capensis tanagra*)

I have not had any record of this bird since it has been seen and heard recently in the Hopuruahine and Aniwanui valleys (G. E. Sopp 1957). It could well have been in the nearby Parahaki, Waiau and Upper Whirinaki catchments also.

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## SHORT NOTE

## ONE-WINGED AUSTRALASIAN HARRIER

On 27 June 1974 I banded an adult female harrier (*Circus approximans*) No. L15317 and she was recovered on 7 February 1977 from a waterhole on our neighbour's property about 1.5 km from the banding site. She was alive and in good condition and I was most surprised to find that her right wing was missing and that the stump of the humerus had healed over. She may have subsisted on frogs or perhaps had been supplied by her mate; the pellet she cast next day contained only vegetation detritus. Seven years ago I rehabilitated a Common Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*) with only one wing. It had survived for 8 days by being fed by its (presumed) parents, although it must have been fledged for well over a month.

Nobody in this area has to my knowledge been shooting or trapping harriers and it seems that the cause of this bird's injury was probably wire or possibly traffic. The only road here is about 0.5 km from the waterhole and is a little-used dead end. We have had 2 wire-casualty harriers sent here in the last 2 years and wire seems to be the most likely cause.

Harriers have been known to survive without feet and this bird has shown that they can survive without a wing. The tenacity of the species is remarkable!

Incidentally, this female was at least 5 years old at the time of recovery and her irides were still dark brown.

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