

NOTORNIS

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AUSTRALIAN COOTS NESTING IN OTAGO

By M. M. SMALL and M. F. SOPER

One of us (M.M.S.) first noticed two pairs of these Coots (*Fulica atra australis*) in the Arrowtown district on 12/10/'58. They were very confiding, allowing us to get a good look at them on numerous occasions, so that there was no doubt about identification. The birds were somewhat larger than a Black Teal, blue black in colour and the cream frontal shield made them unmistakable. Most of their time was spent swimming and diving in typical coot manner in deep water. We heard a variety of calls; the two commonest being a harsh "crark" and a noise very similar to someone chopping with an axe.

About the end of October it became obvious that both pairs were holding territories. We watched this for a while to make sure; then erected a hide in a suitable patch of open water. After a day in the hide the conclusion was reached that they were nesting, but that a boat was going to be needed. On 21/11/'58, using a boat, we saw one pair with two chicks (and almost certainly more but they were being hunted by a Harrier and were taking cover, so the full brood was not ascertained). The other pair had a nest with five eggs. Two "false nests" were found, empty; each at the base of a willow growing out of four feet of water. The nests were made of willow rootlets lined with dead raupo leaves and placed from 4 to 6 inches above the water line. The nest with eggs was similarly placed on a solid foundation deep in the tangle of willow, surrounded by chest-high water, composed of willow rootlets and lined with dead raupo leaves. The five eggs were creamy white, evenly and sparsely spotted with small and medium-sized black spots.

[For some years it has been suspected that a few Australian Coots were breeding in the south of New Zealand. This factual account of nesting is therefore all the more satisfying.—Ed.]



THE LAST (?) OCCURRENCE OF NOTORNIS IN THE NORTH ISLAND

By W. J. PHILLIPPS

The following is submitted as an important and apparently factual occurrence of a strange bird taken in the Ruahines last century. The evidence pre-supposes that the Maoris who identified the bird as the Mohoau had seen similar birds before and were able to make a correct decision, perhaps a remote contingency. But, nevertheless, it seems desirable to place the matter on record in the hope that it will eventually assist in further investigation. Our informant states that the bird had blue feathers and resembled a Pukeko.

In the year 1919, the late Harold Hamilton and the writer were junior members of the staff of the Dominion Museum. At that time there were various rumours that the Takahe had been seen in the back country of Otago, and we discussed the matter many times and even tentatively planned an expedition to search for them. One story on which Harold Hamilton insisted was that about the year 1898, an actual specimen of *Notornis* had been secured in the Tararuas and taken to the home of Mr. Roderick McDonald of Horowhenua.

Interest in the presence of the Takahe in the Wellington Province was heightened by our association in March, 1920, when we excavated Takahe bones from a sinkhole near Martinborough. J. C. Yaldwyn (*Rec.Dom.Mus.*, Vol. 2, pt. 1., pp. 1-7, 1956), revisited the cave and summarized the results. He mentioned that "a number of Takahe bones including seven crania are present, representing a form considerably larger than the extant *N. mantelli*." This may seem to indicate the comparatively recent occurrence of the Takahe in this locality.

In the 1930's I was making an enquiry into carved Maori houses of the Wellington Province, and on one occasion asked Mr. Hone McMillan, late of Koputaroa, if he had ever heard of a strange bird being caught in the Tararuas and taken to the McDonald home at Horowhenua. Hone McMillan was a dignified and careful student, highly respected in the neighbourhood. His answer was quiet and deliberate. He had heard the story and said that some said that the bird was a Takahe; but he had never seen it.

Recently (February 1959) through the courtesy of Mr. Hammond Murray of Lake Papaitonga, Ohau, I have been enabled to meet Mr. Hector McDonald, son of Mr. Roderick A. McDonald who dictated the subject matter of "Te Hekeinga, early days in Horowhenua" to E. O'Donnell, 1929. As a young man Hector McDonald was present when the bird arrived at the McDonald homestead. There was great excitement at the time, particularly among the older Maori population who identified the bird as the rarely seen Mohoau. This was in the autumn of the year 1894. The skin and feathers were kept at the homestead for many years.

Hector McDonald has told us that the following elders of the Ngati Muaupoko tribe came to see the bird or to make their speeches to it: Noa te Whata, Hoani Puihi, Wairama and Rangi Mairehau. The Mohoau had been secured by a surveyor, Morgan Carkeek. He had been working in the north Ruahine ranges, and the bird (or its skin) was brought through with other equipment on pack horses.

Mr. Morgan Carkeek was the grandson of Stephen Carkeek who in 1840 was lent by New South Wales to the New Zealand authorities as a Customs Official at Bay of Islands, and employed in some of the first surveys of that locality. A son of Mr. Morgan Carkeek, Mr. Rikihana Carkeek, still lives at Otaki. He had heard his father mention the incident and the excitement it occasioned.

Reverting to Hector McDonald's story, it seems that Unaika, described as a rangatira woman of Ngati Ruakawa, told Mr. Roderick McDonald that the correct name for Aramoho was Ara Mohoau, the track of the Mohoau. Mr. Hector McDonald worked for some years at Tokaanu and found that Tokaanu Maoris knew of the Mohoau. As recently as 1910, it was common to use the term in application to one who had been away overlong in the bush country. He was a 'Mohoau,' unshaven and unkempt. Mr. R. Carkeek confirmed this usage of the word.