

## THE HUNTER VALLEY, NORTH-WEST OTAGO

By P. CHILD

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The Hunter Valley, lying at the head of Lake Hawea, is at present of interest because the raising of the lake level by 80 feet to provide additional storage for Roxburgh Hydro will extend the lake some eight miles up the valley. The valley runs almost south-north to the confluence of the east and west branches, known as 'the forks,' 30 miles from the lake, and it is a further 10 miles or so to the head of the main (east) branch at Mt. Strauchon (8300ft.) and the extensive Hunter Glacier. The west branch saddles across the Main Divide with the Wills at Wilson's Pass (5040ft.) and with the Landsborough at Studholme Pass (6200ft.). The main valley floor is remarkably level, rising only 800ft. in the 30 miles from the lake to the forks. Below the forks the main tributaries are from the west, saddling with the Makarora and the Wills, while near and above the forks they drain mainly from the east into the east branch and saddle with the south and north branches of the Huxley, main tributary of the Hopkins flowing into Lake Ohau. Most of these side streams come from hanging valleys with gorges, waterfalls or cataracts at their junctions with the main valley. The river flat is some two miles or so wide at the mouth, narrowing gradually to the forks, above which there is little flat country. Successive floods in recent years have increased the size and reduced the stability of the shingle flats, probably to the disadvantage of some ground-nesting birds. The lower ten miles of the valley are characterised by matagauri and tussock flats with a few swampy areas, and manuka and bracken hillsides. Further up beech forest is dominant — mainly mountain beech — with some patches of silver beech, totara and broadleaf.

The region used to be noted for its numbers of red deer; on my 1952 visit, herds of 20 and more were fairly common; however, owing to the activities of professional deer-cullers, there were few deer about this year. A New Zealand record (4100) was shot by Mr. Wattie Cameron and his partner in the 1955-56 season. Chamois appear to be increasing, about 200 having been shot this season already (late January), compared with a total of 114 for the whole of the 1955-56 season. There are fairly rare, only one or two being taken each season. The shrub layer of the beech forest has suffered severely from the browsing of these animals; there is no undergrowth or thin beech saplings whatever, and no evidence of regeneration within the forest, although one or two areas on the open fringes appear to be improving. There is a very marked improvement in the pasture growth on the valley floor over the past seven years, and in many parts of the sub-alpine scrub old deer trails have become overgrown — a rare phenomenon in most of our mountain country.

In view of the extreme dryness of the whole countryside during the 1959 visit it was surprising to find countless swarms of large crane flies in the tussocky basins above the sub-alpine scrub (c. 4000-5000ft.). Another interesting insect which abounded in the beech forest near the lake was the giant green cicada (*Melampsalta cingulata*); the sibilant chirping of thousands of these on a hot afternoon was deafening. The large bluebottle is a pest even above the snowline.

My observations were made during two climbing expeditions to the valley: January 18th to 28th, 1952, and January 16th to 26th, 1959.

(Those given below are for 1959 unless stated otherwise.) I am also indebted to Mr. Cameron for much information — his detailed knowledge of the area and its wild life over four seasons of deer shooting is much more extensive than that obtainable by the casual visitor.

**WADERS:** A few pairs each of Pied Oystercatcher, Banded Dotterel and Pied Stilt were scattered in typical habitats along the valley floor, but did not appear to be as common as in most river valleys of Otago and Canterbury.

**GULLS & TERNS:** Black-billed Gulls were fairly common in the lower valley. Black-backed Gulls are comparatively common in small flocks up the side valleys, heads of streams and along the Main Divide. Eight were observed near the extreme head of the west branch, and one flying at a height of at least 8000ft. above the peaks. A few Black-fronted Terns were observed along the main river.

**WATERFOWL:** A few pairs of Paradise Duck around lower valley areas; there are usually hundreds of these in the main valley but they disperse up the side streams when the duck-shooting season opens.

1 pair of Grey Duck and a pair of Scaup near the forks, and about 20 Scaup near the head of the lake. The Grey Duck are usually seen in greater numbers around the head of the lake in the late evening as they fly off down the lake during the day.

Mr. Cameron has observed a pair of Blue Duck near the head of the east branch.

Several hundred Canada Geese live in the valley and in early January during the moulting season these are often hunted on foot or horseback, but only a limited number of birds are taken each year. The birds are very wily during this period, feeding on the pastures at night and congregating close to the river or hiding in the beech forest during the day. Mr. Cameron states that flappers hide up the side creeks, sometimes being seen above the bushline (about 3800ft.). Despite hunting, they appear to have increased since 1952.

4 of the large Black Shag were seen in the west branch.

**FOREST BIRDS:** Bellbirds were scattered throughout, being most common about the centre of the main valley (between Lake Creek and Long Flat Creek). The Tui is quite rare, only an odd one or two being seen.

Pigeon: Also very common about the centre part of the valley; a hundred or so may be seen feeding on the scrub berries around this area. Quite common and scattered throughout in typical habitats were the Pied Fantail, Tomtit, Rifleman and Grey Warbler. Two Kaka were seen in the same locality as on the 1952 visit. Mr. Cameron thinks they are more noticeable in late spring, and in the late afternoons, when up to twenty have been sighted. This compares with an average of about 6 in 1955. They seem to be much more active on the wing in the cooler part of the late afternoon and early evening.

Long-tailed Cuckoo: Heard on several occasions.

Morepork: Scattered throughout but mainly in lower valley. Two were heard during the night about 1 mile above the lake.

**OPEN-COUNTRY BIRDS:** Both the Harrier and the Falcon were fairly common in the lower valley and around the forest fringe. Mr. Cameron considers that the latter takes a greater toll of native birds than does the Harrier, especially Tomtits, Fantails, and the slow-flying Pigeon. The Harrier possibly does more harm to young geese and ducks than the Falcon.

Kea: Not common in the main valley area, only two being seen at an altitude of 5300ft. One bird was observed prising up quite heavy stones with its beak, and seeking insects, etc., underneath. Their numbers appear to fluctuate with the seasons and they are usually more common at high altitudes in the side valleys. Mr. Cameron has found a Kea's nest with young, above bushline (c. 3800ft.) and well concealed several feet in under a rock, beyond arm's length.

Rock Wren: Fairly numerous in some areas, at high altitudes well above beech line.

Skylark: Common on valley floor at low altitudes. A nest with three eggs was found in the middle of a cart track on 19/1/52.

N.Z. Pipit: Common on grassy and shingly areas at all altitudes up to 6000ft. Generally the most frequently noticed bird of the region above the sub-alpine scrub. Often seen well above the snowline. Caterpillars of the Black Mountain Butterfly form part of its diet in this region.



## RARE FIORDLAND BIRDS

By JOHN HALL-JONES

This may seem a rather belated account of two expeditions which took place some years ago, but the author asks forgiveness and pleads absence overseas for the past three years.

In 1955 I was fortunate enough to accompany a Canterbury Museum party into unexplored Fiordland country west of Te Anau's southern arm. We were fated with the typically heavy rainfall of this region but some interesting ornithological finds were made.

The McKenzie Burn points the way to the west and under the shadow of its surrounding cliffs we found the solitary metatarsus of a bush moa (*Megalapteryx didinus*). Identification of the bone was later confirmed by Mr. R. J. Scarlett of the Canterbury Museum.

Descending into Lake Te Anu, we were greeted by Crested Grebes, Blue Duck, and the now rare Brown Duck. The latter was of particular interest as she was fostering three ducklings.

Two Bush Wrens were seen, and in the vicinity of Coronation Peak, Rock Wrens were relatively common. In the shadow of this peak, amongst typically clipped snowgrass, we discovered some droppings of the *Notornis*. It is interesting to note that this area lies some 25 miles west of Lake Orbell; a considerably further distance when one takes into account the nature of the intervening terrain.

A small party now set off towards Nancy Sound. In a boggy area some three miles outward bound, Hitchings discovered the recent remains of a Kakapo. In the same locality, Bruce found a recently dead Roa (*Apteryx haasti*) with egg.

Homeward bound we noted further *Notornis* droppings as we crossed Robin Saddle, some five miles east of our previous sighting.

Stimulated by our finds of the previous year, Carey, Couzens\*, Reid and I decided to visit the Saddle Hill area of George Sound, where Wisely had sighted two Kakapo in 1949.

February, 1956, found us heading westwards from Te Anau's

\* Killed on 19/11/59 near Cape Selbourne, in Antarctica, when a snowcat which he was driving plunged into a hidden crevasse. He was serving as a Lieutenant in the R.N.Z.A.C.