

## SHORT NOTE

### A possible live South Island snipe (*Coenocorypha iredalei*) at Dusky Sound in 1773

DAVID G. MEDWAY

25A Norman Street, New Plymouth, New Zealand  
dmedway@xtra.co.nz

Lieutenant James Cook was at Dusky Sound in southern New Zealand for 6 weeks from Mar-May 1773 in the course of his 2nd voyage round the world. On board HMS *Resolution* with him were Reinhold Forster, the official naturalist on the voyage, and Forster's son, George, as an assistant naturalist and natural history draughtsman (Beaglehole 1961).

On 15 Apr 1773 Cook, accompanied by the 2 Forsters, set out from the *Resolution* to continue a survey of the northwest side of Dusky Sound. The party arrived back on board on the evening of the following day bringing with them "about 9 Shags, about 40 Waterhens, 27 Ducks, 1 Curlew, 1 Woodcock, 1 Sandpiper, 1 large Pigeon, several Pohebirds, two large Parrots, a Parroquet, & several other small birds" that had been killed during the previous 2 days. Cook sent to "every Mess of petty-Officers a parcel of birds & gave some to his boats-Crew" (Forster, in Hoare 1982: 256-257). The success of the expedition prompted George Forster to observe that "there is no part of New Zealand so well stocked with birds of all kinds as Dusky Bay" (Forster, in Kahn 1968: 104). Reinhold Forster, in his *Descriptiones Animalium* that was written as the voyage proceeded, included a commentary that covers the period of his 1st visit to New Zealand from 27 Mar-7 Jun 1773. In this, Forster included *Scolopax gallinago* among the previously-known birds they had met with in New Zealand: "A single *Tetrao coturnix* of the order of game birds came my way. I will list the others here: *Anas strepera*; *Procellaria vittata*; *Diomedea exulans* & *palpebrata*; *Pelecanus carbo*, *graculus* & *bassanus*; *Larus naevius* & *fuscus*; *Ardea alba* & *jugularis*; *Scolopax gallinago*; *Haematopus ostralegus*" (Forster 1772-1775:1: 97; Lichtenstein 1844: 61). *Scolopax gallinago*, now *Gallinago gallinago*, is the common snipe.

The "woodcock" killed in Dusky Sound during the survey of 15-16 Apr 1773 is the only

snipe-like bird known to have been examined by Reinhold Forster in New Zealand. It is almost certainly the bird that justified the inclusion of *Scolopax gallinago* in the above-quoted passage of *Descriptiones Animalium*. Just 2 years earlier, Forster had completed a catalogue of the animals of North America (Forster 1771). In this catalogue he listed the then known species of North American birds under their respective genera as defined at that time. He included snipe as a species in the woodcock genus. It was not inconsistent, therefore, for Forster to name the Dusky Sound bird as a woodcock in his informal journal, but to name it more precisely as *Scolopax gallinago* in his scientific manuscript.

Clearly, Forster did not consider the "*Scolopax gallinago*" killed in Dusky Sound to be sufficiently different from the common snipe, with which he was familiar, to warrant separate description. His failure to describe a bird that might have been of a new genus and species is not as surprising as it may seem. Forster frequently expressed his considerable reluctance to set up new genera, and even new species, for some of the many birds new to science that were collected during his voyage with Cook. When Forster wrote to Linnaeus in July 1775, near the end of his circumnavigation, he said that "we have been at very great pains not to set up new genera rashly, nor have we created new species except when they could not be referred to any variety of a known species" (Linnean Society, Linnaean Correspondence IV: 283v).

Dusky Sound is not known for its migratory waders, so the specimen of "*Scolopax gallinago*" killed there in Apr 1773 is unlikely to have been a vagrant *Gallinago* snipe, such as a Japanese snipe (*Gallinago hardwickii*). Unfortunately, in the absence of the specimen itself, or of an adequate description or drawing, it is not possible to be certain of its identity. Nevertheless, it is probable that this bird was a South Is snipe (*Coenocorypha iredalei*), a now-extinct taxon that once lived throughout both the

South and Stewart Is, and on the smaller islands off Stewart I.

For most of the 19th century, many parts of New Zealand, including Dusky Sound, were remote and inaccessible and were never visited by naturalists. No further meaningful ornithological observations were made at Dusky Sound until Andreas Reischek and Richard Henry did so 100 and more years after Cook's visit. During the intervening time, both the Norway rat (*Rattus norvegicus*) and the ship rat (*Rattus rattus*) had spread throughout New Zealand with unknown but potentially significant effects on the avifauna of remote parts of the country. It is feasible that some birds survived into the historic period in parts of New Zealand, but were exterminated by introduced mammalian predators before they were seen alive.

It has been assumed, most recently by Tennyson & Martinson (2006), that, because of the absence of records of living birds, *Coenocorypha iredalei* is likely to have been exterminated from the South I and Stewart I by Pacific rats (*Rattus exulans*) soon after their prehistoric introduction. Reinhold Forster's record of "*Scolopax gallinago*" from Dusky Sound in 1773 indicates that *Coenocorypha iredalei* may have survived into the historic period on the South Island. Both the New Zealand dotterel (*Charadrius o. obscurus*) and the shore plover (*Thinornis novaeseelandiae*) were collected and described in Dusky Sound by the Forsters in 1773 (Medway 2006), and both species may have bred there at that time. Those 2 ground-nesting species obviously survived into the historic period in that locality, but were never recorded from there again.

## LITERATURE CITED

- Beaglehole, J.C. (ed.). 1961. *The journals of Captain James Cook on his voyages of discovery. The voyage of the Resolution and Adventure 1772-1775*. London, Cambridge University Press for The Hakluyt Society.
- Forster, J.R. 1771. *A catalogue of the animals of North America*. London.
- Forster, J.R. 1772-1775. *Descriptiones Animalium quae in Itinere ad maris Australis terras suscepto collegit, descripsit & delineavit Joannes Reinoldus Forster ...* 4 ms vol. (Ms Lat quart 133-136) in Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin.
- Hoare, M.E. (ed.). 1982. *The Resolution journal of Johann Reinhold Forster 1772-1775*. 4 vol. London, The Hakluyt Society.
- Kahn, R.L. (ed.). 1968. *Georg Forsters Werke. Samtliche Schriften, Tagebücher, Briefe. A Voyage Round the World, vol. 1*. Berlin, Akademie-Verlag.
- Lichtenstein, H. (ed.). 1844. *Descriptiones animalium quae in itinere ad maris australis terras per annos 1772 1773 et 1774 suscepto collegit observavit et delineavit Joannes Reinoldus Forster ....* Berlin.
- Medway, D.G. 2006. Discovery and description of New Zealand endemic shorebirds: an historical overview (Abstract). *Stilt* 49: 45-46.
- Tennyson, A.; Martinson, P. 2006. *Extinct birds of New Zealand*. Wellington, Te Papa Press.

**Keywords** Cook's voyages; Dusky Sound; South Island snipe; *Coenocorypha iredalei*; possible record