

SHORT NOTE

Pukeko (*Porphyrio porphyrio*) predation of a house sparrow (*Passer domesticus*)

MEGAN L. WISHART

MOTAT, P.O. Box 44114 Point Chevalier, Auckland 1246, New Zealand
meganwishart@yahoo.co.uk

The pukeko (*Porphyrio porphyrio*), or swamphen, is native to New Zealand. Pukeko diet mainly consists of plant material, but it is also an opportunistic feeder of carrion and live animals like insects, lizards, bird eggs and small birds (e.g. Carroll 1966; Fitzgerald 1966; McKenzie 1967; Fogarty 1968; Wright 1978). Most of the birds that they eat seem to be young chicks that are relatively easy to catch. This is supported by observations of pukeko preying on mallard ducklings (*Anas platyrhynchos*) (Wright 1978) and video evidence of a pukeko taking blackbird (*Turdus merula*) chicks from a nest (Morgan et al. 2006). However, McKenzie (1967) reported seeing a pukeko coming out of a blackberry paddock carrying what appeared to be an adult blackbird. The author was not positive the blackbird was alive, but he speculated that the pukeko may have taken it while it was feeding on blackberries. There are few direct reports detailing actual predation events by pukeko on birds and to my knowledge no confirmed case of pukeko taking birds capable of flight.

I report here observations of a pukeko that captured a house sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) that was probably capable of flight. On a cloudy morning in early Dec 2002, I looked out the north-west-facing library window at MOTAT (Museum of Transport and Technology) in response to excited calling from a group of around 10 sparrows. The sparrows were in trees behind the hurricane wire boundary fence with Western Springs Park. Around 8 metres away from where I stood an adult pukeko was on grass just in front of the wire boundary fence. The pukeko had its foot firmly over a sparrow that was flat on the grass. I could clearly see one wing of the sparrow that was open and spread out

on the ground. The sparrow appeared to be a fully-feathered adult and was not moving. The pukeko had begun to eat material from the sparrow's head. After eating the material the pukeko took the dead sparrow out of sight under the hurricane wire fence into Western Springs Park.

I did not see the pukeko place its foot on the sparrow, but the excited calling by the other sparrows suggested that they had just witnessed a predation event and that the pukeko was not simply scavenging a carcass. Therefore, it is likely that the predated sparrow was capable of flight and taken unawares by the pukeko. In the 2 weeks prior to the sparrow incident, I had often seen a pukeko pair foraging in the area where I saw the pukeko eating the sparrow. The pair had recently visited the area with a chick. Craig (1974) noted that pukeko mainly took animal prey during the breeding season, and mostly fed this to chicks. My observation and those of Wright (1978) and Morgan et al. (2006) are direct evidence of pukeko taking live birds in the breeding season. The pukeko that Wright (1978) observed take ducklings fed pieces of one to chicks. My observation supports McKenzie's (1967) suggestion that opportunistic predation of live birds by pukeko is not limited to chicks but appears to occasionally include mature birds capable of flight.

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