

LETTERS

SUBFOSSIL SNIPE

It was with considerable interest that I read about the subfossil distribution of *Coenocorypha* in the North and South Islands (Miskelly 1987), but it was with some consternation that I saw subspecific status being applied to the bird represented by these bones. Firstly, no osteological comparison is presented to show that South Island snipe are the same as those that were on islands around Stewart Island, or are indeed different to those from the North Island. The proposed scheme is consistent with taxonomic trends in other avian taxa in New Zealand but is it really warranted? The majority of avian subspecies in New Zealand are indistinguishable osteologically, e.g. tits, fantails, bellbirds, and their status is only maintained to distinguish differences in plumage and/or behaviour. Neither of these characters are available for description in subfossil material. If there is variation, it may be clinal, it may separate Northland birds from the rest, but at present variation is not demonstrated; therefore I suggest that subfossil snipe in New Zealand be called *Coenocorypha aucklandica*. After all, does this obscure information?

REFERENCE

MISKELLY, C.M., 1987. The identity of the hakaui. *Notornis* 24: 95-116.

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I accept Mr Worthy's criticism of giving subspecific status to bones in the absence of known differences in plumage and/or behaviour. However, subspecific names have been proposed for skins of New Zealand Snipe collected at either end of a geographic range within which subfossil snipe bones have been found (Oliver 1955). To lump all subfossil bones from the North and South Islands into one taxon does obscure information, as this scheme ignores any heuristic hypotheses on the historical distributions of two demonstrably distinct forms. For example, the scheme proposed by Worthy would leave *C. a. barrierensis* as a form endemic to Little Barrier Island. As no other avian subspecies are currently recognised as having evolved in isolation on any island thought to have been connected to the North Island during the last glaciation, a more parsimonious hypothesis is to consider Little Barrier I. as the final refuge of a formerly widespread North Island form (as has occurred more recently with the Stitchbird (*Notiomystis cincta*)).

My proposed distribution of snipe subspecies on the New Zealand mainland was admittedly premature. I raised the issue to point out the availability of the names *iredalei* and *barrierensis* (the latter consistently overlooked by New Zealand ornithologists, e.g. Kinsky 1970, 1980), and in the hope of preventing any attempts to erect new subspecific names for mainland snipe (see Medway 1971, Millener 1981: 417). Since submitting the "Hakawai" manuscript I have measured all available *Coenocorypha* bones in New Zealand institutions and have obtained X-rays of the unique holotype of *C. a. barrierensis*. A revised classification of the genus is in preparation.

LITERATURE CITED

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