

SHORT NOTE

High Altitude Records of Pukeko in the Southern Alps

Mount Aspiring National Park

On 21 February 1984, Mr G. P. Paltridge brought to the Canterbury Museum some fresh bird remains that he had found at a height of 1350 m, 0.75 km south-east of Rabbit Pass in the head of the East Branch of the Matukituki River, Mount Aspiring National Park. I identified the remains as Pukeko (*Porphyrio porphyrio melanotus*).

Mr Paltridge noted the absence of swamps over the route tramped by him and his companion, Mr J. C. Smith, up the Wilkin River and its South Branch, across Rabbit Pass, and into the headwaters (East Branch and Kitchener Stream) of the Matukituki River.

The black bill tip, plumage and some external measurements confirmed that the Pukeko was a juvenile.

Child (1981), in a survey of the bird life of the Park, reported Pukeko in the lower Okuru River, about 40 km in a direct line north-east of Rabbit Pass.

Mount Cook National Park

On 5 February 1984, Mr D. McNulty, a guide in the Mount Cook National Park, observed (from c. 1030 to 1130h) a live Pukeko at 2350 m



A Pukeko at 2350 m near the Tasman Saddle hut, Mount Cook National Park, 5 February 1984

Photo D. McNulty

near the Tasman Saddle hut. The day was fine with a southerly wind and patches of mist. Over the two days that preceded this sighting the weather in the Park had been misty with moderate south-easterly winds.

Mr McNulty saw three Pukeko at the end of January 1984 at 550 m, about 48 km from the Tasman Saddle hut in the Glentanner swamp. On 29 February 1984, Mr R. Slater put to flight a Pukeko at 750 m in the Mount Cook Village. There have been no other recent reports of Pukeko at high altitudes in the Park (J. Atkinson, pers. comm).

J. Atkinson (pers. comm.) has reported that on average 5-8 Pukeko are seen regularly in Glentanner swamp and they are known to breed there. Green (1883) observed 'numerous swamphens' on Birch Hill Station in Lagoon Stream Swamp. This is at c. 610 m. Brodrick (1880-1931), while surveying the road line at the head of Lake Pukaki [c. 485 m], made the following diary entry on 24 October 1888 "... there are scores of dead swamphens all along the edge of the swamps. I suppose killed by the heavy snow last winter."

Douglas, in his monograph *Birds of South Westland* (c. 1899) cited by Pascoe (1957 p. 235), commented that Pukeko "... can cross the main range, but many must perish on the journey as I have often found them dead on glacier and snow field." According to Carroll (1969) Pukeko in New Zealand rarely live at high altitudes; they are most abundant from 1200 ft [366 m] to sea level. Carroll (1969) reported a Pukeko banded in February 1967 and recovered in May 1967 112 miles [180 km] from its liberation point. It seems reasonable to speculate therefore that Pukeko occupying habitat at higher altitudes than usual in the vicinity of the main divide are likely to be blown off course into localities well above their usual altitudinal range. It is possible that the Rabbit Pass juvenile Pukeko may have been carried by a bird of prey, although the corpse showed no obvious signs of this. I have twice observed live juvenile Pukeko snatched off the ground and carried about 40 m by an Australasian Harrier (*Circus approximans*).

I am grateful to Graeme Paltridge and John Atkinson for allowing me to report their observations.

LITERATURE CITED

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