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SHORT NOTE

LEG COLOUR AND DOMINANCE IN BUFF WEKAS

During a 6-week stay on the main Chatham Island, casual observations were made of the Buff Weka (*Gallirallus australis hectori*). Buff Wekas, introduced to the Chatham Islands in 1905, are now very common over most of the main island. The following observations were made at a campsite in the Tuku-a-tamatea Valley between 15 December 1978 and 30 January 1979.

Up to 16 wekas could be seen at a time near the dining shelter at the camp, and considerable variation in plumage and leg colour was noted. Several of the birds were distinctive enough to be individually identified, and it soon became apparent that there was a definite pecking order among the camp's weka population.

About half-way through my stay, I realised there was a relationship between dominance and leg colour in the wekas around camp. The three most dominant wekas in camp had the most intense leg colour, that of the "top" bird reaching a strong pink-red. From this there was a continuous gradation through to pale orange-pink, the leg colour of the most lowly birds. Young birds were noted as having brownish-pink legs.

Once I had seen this relationship, I made a point of noting the leg colours of any wekas involved in fights. Out of many such incidents, only twice did birds with paler leg colour come out on top, but in both cases the difference in leg colour between the two birds was slight.

The possibility that leg colour and dominance have an indirect relationship was considered, but appears unlikely. Firstly, assuming that the oldest birds were the palest in plumage colour (recently fledged chicks were noted as being the darkest), there was no apparent relationship between plumage and leg colour, and thus dominance, in the older birds. Obviously, very young birds will be low in the pecking order, and they also have dull legs. Secondly, leg colour is unlikely to be related to quality or quantity of food consumed by each bird because often the most dominant birds spent more time chasing other wekas than feeding, and so birds with less intense leg colour appeared to get more food (at least in the form of kitchen scraps, the main food of the camp wekas).

I have been unable to find any reference to such a relationship in the literature; books describe wekas' legs as being brown or reddish. Oliver, in "New Zealand Birds" (1955), gives more detail, describing *G. a. greyi* as "feet brown," *G. a. australis* as "feet reddish brown, darker brown behind," and *G. a. scotti* as "feet pink, brownish on hind part of tarsus." The leg colour of *G. a. hectori* (which Oliver treats as a full species) is described as "reddish brown, hinder aspect . . . brown," with immatures described as "bill and feet paler."

This may be only a localised phenomenon caused by the high-density weka population around the camp site, but observations on the Chathams and in places where other weka subspecies are found may reveal that this relationship occurs more widely.

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FIRST RECORD OF THE STILT SANDPIPER FROM AUSTRALASIA

A Stilt Sandpiper (*Micropalama himantopus*) was present at the Sanderson Sewerage Ponds, Darwin, NT, from 30 August 1980 to 4 September 1980. The bird, in partial breeding plumage, is shown in the accompanying photograph among a group of Sharp-tailed and Curlew Sandpipers. The Stilt Sandpiper, a likely candidate for the New Zealand list, was first located by J. L. McKean, A. L. Hertog and N. Marr. The photograph was taken by H. A. F. Thompson (courtesy Limosa Agency). A full account will be published in the *Northern Territory Naturalist*.

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