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SHORT NOTE

COLONISATION OF COPPERMINE ISLAND BY THE NORTH ISLAND SADDLEBACK

The North Island Saddleback (*Philesturnus carunculatus rufusater*) was formerly abundant on the mainland and major offshore islands (Williams 1976). Today it is confined naturally to Hen Island in the Hen and Chickens Group (Fig. 1). Since 1964, Wildlife Service staff have transferred wild-captured birds from Hen to six other islands in the outer Hauraki Gulf (Mills & Williams 1978). All but one of these liberations have resulted in the establishment of successful populations (Merton 1975 a, b). Liberation of birds on to Fanal Island has failed (C. R. Veitch, pers. comm.).

Two populations were established on islands in the Hen and Chickens Group. Birds were transferred to Whatupuke Island in 1964 (Merton 1965) and to Lady Alice (Marotiri) Island in 1971 (Merton 1975 a, b). The birds are weak fliers and were considered incapable of crossing the 150 m from Whatupuke to Coppermine Island. They were believed capable of "only about 50 m of sustained flight" (Merton 1975 b).

Between 20 November and 3 December 1979, a party consisting of Dick Anderson, John Craig, Duncan Cunningham, Rod Hitchmough, Ian McFadden, Don Newman, Joan Robb and Anne Stewart visited Lady Alice, Whatupuke and Coppermine Islands to investigate the distribution and status of tuataras (*Sphenodon punctatus*), and Polynesian rats (*Rattus exulans*). During this period at least 10 pairs of Saddlebacks were seen on Coppermine dispersed over the entire island. Joan Robb and Rod Hitchmough also reported seeing a lone Saddleback on Middle Stack, which lies at least 250 m from both Lady Alice and Whatupuke Islands (Fig. 1). On two subsequent checks of the Stack, however, the bird was not seen.

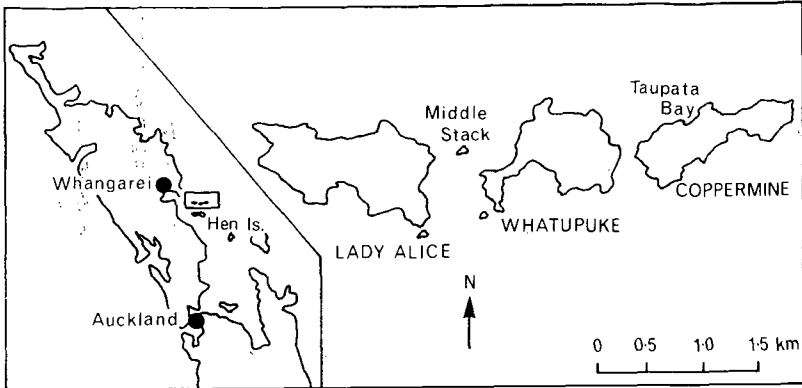


FIGURE 1 — Map of Chicken Islands, showing Lady Alice, Whatupuke and Coppermine Islands.

An earlier sighting of Saddlebacks on Coppermine Island was made by J. S. Macdonald, G. McMillan and E. F. I. Blackmore in 1967 (J. S. Macdonald, pers. comm.). During a brief visit on the afternoon of 2 February 1967, they saw "several" Saddlebacks flying over their heads at the northern side of the island west of Taupata Bay. However, in later surveys, particularly those led by Merton (24-31 October 1968) and Veitch (18-31 March 1971), no birds were seen (D. V. Merton, C. R. Veitch, pers. comm.).

Both Lady Alice and Whatupuke Islands currently support Saddleback populations of equivalent density to that on Hen Island (C. R. Veitch, pers. comm.). As adult Saddlebacks are both long-lived (4 banded birds on Lady Alice are at least 8 years old) and strongly territorial, there must now be considerable pressure for young birds to move away from these islands. Under this stimulus to move in order to attain a territory and breeding status, Saddleback must occasionally be capable of flights, over water, of up to 250 m.

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