

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

In this issue we have devoted considerable space to a review of an important new manual dealing with bones, largely of birds, and their identification. Any manual, by its very name designed as something to be used, deserves to be examined and reported upon in a critical fashion, and we are fortunate in being able to present such a review written by Dr John Yaldwyn, a man of many parts, at home in the diverse fields incumbent upon a museum man, and hence ably qualified to assess the value and significance of this particular work.

That the present is the key to the past has become a rather hackneyed expression but there is no doubt that our knowledge of the origin, development and distribution of our bird fauna could owe much to a blending of what we have discovered about both living and fossil birds in New Zealand (1). Members of the OSNZ, dedicated though they may be to the study of the living bird, may, none the less, find some satisfaction in having the value and limitations of a study in this field of interest shown to them. I have tried already to indicate something of the unique role of birds in the economy of the Maori in contrast to the mammalian food resources revealed in European and North American archaeological sites (2) and there is still a great deal to be done to develop this theme.

Your reviewer and your editor became interested together in subfossil and archaeological birds as schoolboy archaeologists digging under the expert eye of Dr Roger Duff, in Von Haast's early Maori middens at Redcliffs near Christchurch, cycling out from school with spades and sacks over the handlebars and returning loaded with fascinating booty, bones rather than artifacts, and this well before the current archaeological enthusiasm in New Zealand. Although the bones of mammals and moas predominated at this site, we became excited at what the small birds might tell us from their remains. However, for both of us, what I have previously spoken of (3) as "multifarious, imperious duties" (using the words of Henry O. Forbes, one-time Curator of the Canterbury Museum and pioneer in the "palaeornithology" of New Zealand, in excusing his distractions and tardiness in working up his own work at Redcliffs), befell us, and our ways and occupations left us but little occasion to develop this interest. We unwillingly emulated Dr R. A. Falla who had inherited the mantle of H. O. Forbes and had made studies of small birds from the classic sites of Wairau Bar and Pyramid Valley (4, 5) but who also found the duties of office a deterrent from such interests.

It is all the more pleasing, therefore, that Mr R. J. Scarlett, now osteologist at the Canterbury Museum, has been able, due to the informed direction of that museum, to emerge from his many and colourful interests, experiences and hobbies to devote himself single-mindedly, with neither diversion nor distraction, to characterise the birds of New Zealand as shown by their skeletal remains. Some space, as has been said, is devoted to this review because Mr Scarlett's book, in its field and in its wide application and interest to several

disciplines each involved in unravelling our past, is as important as the handbook of Falla, Sibson & Turbott is to the living ornithology of New Zealand.

Indeed it has been a particular relief to one of us to see this manual appear and to be able to abandon his own oft-attempted and much-frustrated efforts to produce such a volume, an ambition which he misguidedly has noted in print (6) and which may have hindered others so minded.

The next stage is to use this tool of identification to interpret the New Zealand birds of the past and the deposits in which they occur in terms of what we know of the needs of birds of to-day. Woefully, such attempts for the New Zealand scene (or for most other places as I have previously (2) demonstrated) clearly shows how shallow and superficial our knowledge of modern birds really is. I make no apology for using the pages of *Notornis* to say something of this fascinating and hopefully fruitful field of study and interest. Perhaps this manual and its potential use for the interpretation of both of the past and the present will be a challenge to us to get out and look at what is around us *now*!

References: (1) FALLA, R. A. 1955. New Zealand bird life past and present. *Cawthron Lecture Series* No. 29. Nelson: The Cawthron Institute; (2) DAWSON, E. W. 1963. Bird remains in archaeology. Pp. 279-293 in: BROTHWELL, D. & HIGGS, E. (eds.). *Science in Archaeology. A comprehensive survey of progress and research.* 595 pp. London: Thames & Hudson; (3) DAWSON, E. W. 1958. Rediscoveries of the New Zealand subfossil birds named by H. O. Forbes. *Ibis* 100 (2): 232-237; (4) FALLA, R. A. 1941. The avian remains. Pp. 339-353 in: Preliminary report on excavations at Pyramid Valley swamp, Waikari, North Canterbury. *Records of the Canterbury Museum* 4 (7): 325-353; (5) FALLA, R.A. 1942. Bird remains from moa-hunter camps. *Records of the Canterbury Museum* 5 (7): 43-49; (6) DAWSON, E. W. 1969. Bird remains in archaeology. Pp. 359-375 in: BROTHWELL & HIGGS, *q.v.*, revised and enlarged edition, 720 pp.