

Birds v. Rats and Red Deer in New Zealand

By *L. W. McCaskill*

Rats and red deer are two of the major hazards that have reduced several species of New Zealand birds to the verge of extinction. The author describes the efforts being made to save these birds, the new threat to Coppermine Island, main breeding ground of the flesh-footed shearwater, where tuataras share the shearwaters' burrows, and the more hopeful outlook for the takahe.

ONE in eleven on the revised IUCN* list of rare and endangered birds are New Zealand species, and three of these are confined to three small islands off the coast of Stewart Island: Big South Cape, Solomon and Pukeweka. They are the Stewart Island snipe *Coenocorypha aucklandica iredalei*, Stead's bush wren *Xenicus longipes variabilis* and South Island saddleback *Philesturnus carunculatus carunculatus*. On the three main islands of New Zealand and on many of the small offshore islands, several species of birds have been exterminated and many more reduced to small numbers as the result of the destruction of habitat and the introduction of predatory animals, especially rats.

Only on some of the offshore islands, where rats had not penetrated, did some of the rare species appear to be safe. In 1923 Guthrie-Smith visited Big South Cape island and studied the three species mentioned above, and in *Sorrows and Joys of a New Zealand Naturalist*, published in 1936, he wrote: "Excepting for these minor troubles, the continuance of the snipe is assured, though always hangs overhead the sword of Damocles; should rats obtain a footing, farewell to snipe, robin, bush wren and saddleback As on the mainland, these four interesting breeds would disappear."

Unfortunately the sword of Damocles fell in the early sixties and the outlook for these three species is alarming if not hopeless. How the rats reached the islands is not known, but they rapidly increased to astronomical numbers with disastrous effects on the vegetation and the bird life. Herbaceous plants and ferns as well as small shrubs were eaten down to the ground and the surface was beaten hard with the tracking of thousands of feet. Bird numbers were so reduced that the Wildlife Division of the Department of Internal Affairs took immediate action to transfer some of the remaining birds to adjacent islands which are still free of rats. In September, 1964, they caught 21 saddlebacks and liberated some on Stage Island and 15 on Kaimohu; six wrens were also taken to Kaimohu. In February, 1965,

* International Union for Conservation of Nature.

it was found that saddlebacks had bred on both islands, with at least three broods on Stage and one on Kaimohu. Four wrens were seen but it was not known if they had bred. Unfortunately time did not permit a search for and capture of any snipe that may have escaped the rats. In July, 1965, 30 more saddlebacks were caught on Big South Cape and liberated on the Inner Chetwode Islands in Cook Strait, not so far from the place where Forster discovered the species on Cook's second voyage to New Zealand. On two occasions since then, saddlebacks have been seen there.

Members of the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society, the main conservation organisation in New Zealand, have worked tirelessly to lay rat poison on the infested islands. Indications are that their efforts are meeting with some success, and plans have been made for regular replenishment of the baits. Transport to these remote islands is difficult to arrange and the normal stormy conditions make landings dangerous and often impossible. Conservationists are indignant with some of the Government scientific advisers' attempts to prevent any further bird transfers and rat poisoning on the grounds that "it would be interesting to scientists to see what kind of equilibrium would develop if we do nothing."

As if rats were not a sufficient problem to face, bird protectionists in New Zealand have to fight commercial interests who hope to capitalise the present temporary world shortage of copper. About 65 miles north of Auckland, are the Hen and Chicken Islands, all scenic reserves and as such supposed to be inviolable sanctuaries for plant and animal life. One of them, Coppermine, an island of about 100 acres, is of great importance because it is the main breeding ground of the flesh-footed shearwater *Puffinus carneipes hullianus*, and associated with the shearwater in the breeding burrows are large populations of tuatara *Sphenodon punctatum*.

The Nature Conservation Council misguidedly approved a Government proposal to allow Conzine Rio Tinto of Australia to prospect on Coppermine for minerals, but public agitation persuaded the Government to have the investigation made by the Geological Survey instead. The Minister of Mines has said that he shares the widely expressed view that only very substantial ore deposits of high quality would justify any disturbance. Conservationists say it is simply a choice between a temporary addition to overseas income or preservation in perpetuity of a unique sanctuary for living creatures entitled to a place to live.

The present situation of the kakapo *Strigops habroptilus* is really desperate. If any birds still exist it will be in Fiordland National Park. Here every effort has been made to exterminate the red deer in the last known kakapo habitat as it appears that the deer compete with the birds for their favourite food. Rats and stoats have probably also played a part in the near extinction of this bird. As a last resort, the National Parks Authority has approved attempts to breed in captivity

(Continued on page 38)

Parks Service, who is acting as Deputy Director of National Parks in Jordan, and this park is expected to be declared shortly.

To-day the wildlife interest in Jordan is mainly the birds, but if the Royal Jordanian Hunting Club can get its way, if the hunting laws can be enforced and the goat population drastically reduced, it may be that gazelles and oryx, the wild ass and the addax, ostrich and houbara bustard, cheetah and ibex will be drawing the tourist from the west as the African game parks do to-day. In this the FPS intends to lead the way, and plans are now being made for a tour for its members to see the wildlife and deserts (and also of course the archæological wonders) of this extraordinarily interesting country. The interesting thing in Jordan is that the initiative for wildlife conservation and the drive for putting it into practice have come from the hunters, and it may well prove easier for the Jordanian people to accept the principles of conservation from them than it would from any other quarter.

As we go to press we learn that HM King Hussein has approved the creation of a new and widely representative body, The Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature, of which the Hunting Club will be the executive body.—Editor.

Continued from page 34

any birds which may be discovered in what may be a last effort to locate them.

The position of the takahe *Notornis hochstetteri*, however, is more hopeful. Deer destruction in the Special Area has prevented further destruction of the habitat and strict control of entry has reduced disturbance to a minimum. But with a total population of not more than 200 birds, it is considered that continuing attempts should be made to breed birds in captivity. Further action is being taken this year.

READ AUDUBON MAGAZINE

America's popular, authentic and educational nature publication. Leading writers and photographers. Subscription rate \$7.00 per year for 6 colourful issues.

**NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY
1130 FIFTH AVENUE
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10028**