

Birding New Zealand : Sadness, Spectacle, Hope?

Sadness

Tim Birkhead's excellent book: "Bird Sense" opens with the following attention-grabbing quote: "Bugged" is how most New Zealanders describe their bird fauna and it is". The evidence is compelling. Since the first Polynesian settlers arrived in New Zealand some time in the thirteenth century, fifty eight bird species have been extinguished there. Beautifully illustrated and carefully researched, Tennyson and Martinson's "Extinct Birds of New Zealand" is the most poignant piece of ornithological writing I've ever encountered. It may well need a future revision. Several species are still critically endangered, their survival dependent on huge and expensive conservation efforts by a range of government and voluntarily funded organisations.

Visit a variety of promising looking habitats in the country and the lack of native birds is quickly apparent. In the company of ex SBSG stalwart, Neil Robertson, we walk river-bank, hillside and farmland close to his Te Anau, South Island home. Much of it is almost devoid of native species. Along the wooded Kepler Track however we see and hear many birds: scores of Lesser Redpolls and Chaffinches, Song Thrushes in numbers not often encountered at home and Blackbird song drowning out the occasional bursts from native Bellbirds, Fantails and Grey Warblers. The worthy members of the late nineteenth century "Acclimatisation Societies" who regarded New Zealand's bird fauna as deficient or impoverished would have been delighted if they'd known how successful their introductions of European and Australian species would prove to be.

With some exceptions however, avian introductions are not the problem. Eight centuries of habitat destruction and hunting for food and feathers by the earliest settlers or for trophies to satisfy the desires of nineteenth century egg and skin collectors all played a part but much of the calamitous decline in New Zealand's bird life has resulted from the accidental or deliberate introduction of a small number of mammal species to islands that had enjoyed sixty five million years of isolation from any other land mass. As a consequence of that isolation, apart from three species of bat, there were no land mammals in New Zealand.

Pacific rats, hitching lifts on the boats of the early Polynesian settlers were the first to make an impact. Larger Norway and Black Rats arrived with the Europeans from the early nineteenth century onwards and accelerated the demise of much of what remained. Cats, dogs and pigs added to the slaughter. Equally devastating were the deliberate releases. Rabbits were introduced from the mid-nineteenth century to provide food and a hoped for export trade in rabbit skins. Within a matter of years they had become a serious agricultural pest. To concerned farmers the solution was obvious: introduce their "natural enemy" in the form of stoats, weasels and ferrets. For thirty years following the first releases in 1867 mustelids were introduced throughout New Zealand. They flourished, but not by hunting rabbits. Flightless birds, ground dwellers that flew only reluctantly and hole nesters all proved to be much easier prey. New Zealand's native birds had evolved in a land free from mammalian predators and as a result the majority were ill equipped to survive in all but the most remote environments.

Releases of herbivores have also played and continue to play a significant part in the saga. New Zealand's native flora like its fauna is greatly impoverished. Much was lost to agriculture and forestry but what remains is threatened by other mammalian introductions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Seven species of deer introduced for sport or ornamentation flourish in the forests. Without any predation apart from hunting they cause extensive damage. The Brush-tailed Possum introduced for its fur from the early nineteenth century has had and continues to have

an even greater impact. Current estimates put the population at about thirty million. They thrive on native plants, destroy habitat, out-compete native birds for food and have been recorded eating eggs and chicks in their nests. We celebrate each road-side possum carcass that we pass as we travel the country.

Spectacle

Despondency is tempered as we focus on coastal New Zealand. We take a pelagic trip from Kaikoura on South Island's East coast. A fast boat takes us six miles off shore through choppy seas to a point where the continental shelf gives way to a 2km deep canyon. Marine life is abundant and so are sea birds. A smallish container of fish remains is lowered from the stern. In the space of half an hour we have close encounters with seven species of albatross and five each of petrel and shearwater. Even after my half century of birding it's hard to think of a better morning than this though I'm mindful that much of what we're seeing breeds only on distant and largely predator free islands and headlands.

On North Island we stay two nights at the Miranda Shorebird Centre. Spectacle again. We watch as the incoming tide pushes huge flocks of waders towards us. Thousands of Bar-tailed Godwits, South Island Pied Oystercatchers and Pied Stilts erupt from the mudflats and shell chenier plains, wheel in the sunshine and settle ever closer to the hide along with smaller numbers of Banded Dotterel, Knot and Pacific Golden Plover. Already behind us, several hundred delightful Wrybills are roosting on grassland and on the nearby lagoon, Marsh and Sharp-tailed Sandpipers feed in the shallows. And yet even here we're not removed from the problems that face New Zealand's birds. We locate a single spectacular New Zealand Shore Plover, one of the two hundred or so in existence but fail to see the Black Stilt that others had found earlier. There are fewer than a hundred in New Zealand at present, the population under threat from a variety of circumstances, though intensive efforts of conservationists have succeeded in increasing numbers from the 23 adults that formed the world population in 1981. Even the endemic Wrybills, with two thousand or so around Miranda representing a sizeable proportion of the global population, have a conservation listing as vulnerable with numbers showing a slow but steady decline.

Hope?

:"The most melodious wild musick I have ever heard" was Joseph Banks' take on the bird song he was hearing as the Endeavour explored New Zealand's coasts in 1770. Despite two and a half centuries of ecological carnage it's still just possible to catch an echo of that in a few well-protected parts of the country.

Ulva Island lies within Stewart Island's Paterson Inlet. Most of its 270 hectares are managed by the country's Department of Conservation supported by the Ulva Island Charitable Trust. Here pests, seldom numerous, have been eradicated, the native flora is largely intact and, assisted by some careful re-introductions, birds which are rare and endangered elsewhere thrive. We visit fairly early in the morning and the sounds are very different to those we've encountered previously. There is an abundance of birds calling, singing and showing obligingly: We encounter South Island Saddlebacks, Yellowheads, Tuis, Red-capped Parakeets, Kakas, Bellbirds and New Zealand Pigeons. Several Stewart Island Robins and a single Weka encounter us pecking hopefully at the earth disturbed by our footsteps. I enjoy the weird privilege of having my toes pecked by one of the planet's rarest birds.

Tiritiri Matangi is an island reachable via a seventy five minute ferry trip from Auckland. Like Ulva it is an open sanctuary. Extensive replanting with native trees in the 1980s and 90s, subsequent reintroductions of several bird species and rigorous measures to ensure that visitors don't accidentally bring rodents, insects and seeds

have made the island a wonderful birding location. We come across several species that have been rescued from the verge of extinction: Stitchbirds are numerous, a family of Takahes, a bird believed to be extinct until a population was discovered in 1948 wander across the track in front of us but we narrowly miss a couple of Kokako.

Even closer to human settlement, the Karori Wildlife Sanctuary in a Wellington suburb styles itself as the world's first fully-fenced urban eco-sanctuary. Over thirty species of native bird thrive there, protected from predators by a formidable perimeter barrier and again we enjoy walking the wooded tracks and watching species which are very rare or absent elsewhere in mainland New Zealand.

These are high profile conservation success stories dependent on considerable government and voluntary funding. There are many more examples of islands and fenced headlands where predator eradication has enabled threatened species to be successfully relocated from relict populations or from increasing stock in sanctuaries such as Tiritiri Matangi. Less obvious are efforts by local community groups pooling resources to create and manage predator free areas.

So is there hope for New Zealand's native avifauna? In tiny, well-funded, well-protected reserves some species at risk elsewhere are flourishing and some of the more accessible locations seem to be popular attractions for school and college parties as well as tourists from New Zealand and beyond. There does seem to be considerable awareness in the country of the plight of New Zealand's native flora and fauna as well as of the benefits that eco-tourism can bring to favoured communities.

But as is evident throughout the world there are vested interests that seek to curb measures to preserve and restore threatened habitats and their occupants. Hunting interests oppose attempts to curb deer populations. Judging by frequent anti-1080 (Sodium Fluoroacetate) posters and stickers that adorn farm gates and car windows there are many that are against the widespread use of a chemical that does have an impact on the possum population. Hydro-electric power schemes and mining operations continue to damage vulnerable habitats and while much expense and effort goes into the elimination of wild mammalian predators it's difficult to be optimistic about a widespread recovery of native bird species in a country where 48% of households own cats.

And yet in our last 24 hours in New Zealand we chance upon two examples of local communities attempting to restore habitat and to eliminate predators. The first, at Army Bay near Gulf Harbour, looks like a well-funded local authority initiative with high fencing protecting quite a substantial wooded area and its inhabitants. We learn of another from a friend who emigrated to New Zealand many years ago. She lives on the Awhitu Peninsula not far from Auckland where her family and many others in her community work energetically and effectively together on a voluntary basis to restore habitat and to control predators in an area of nearly 400 square kilometres. And they're getting results. Two small and perhaps untypical examples, it's difficult to draw conclusions. But one final thought: Dr James Russell, a quantitative ecologist at Auckland University, recently calculated that the elimination of the most significant mammalian threats to New Zealand's flora and fauna would cost something in the order of \$NZ 24.6 billion or 12% of the country's GDP. A staggering figure but it's worth comparing it to the \$US 170 Billion (2005 value) that it cost the American public to put men on the moon through the Apollo programme. Interesting to debate the value of that compared to the cost of going some way to restoring the flora and fauna of a very special part of the world.

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