

1892.

NEW ZEALAND.

NATIVE NEW ZEALAND BIRDS

(MEMORANDUM BY LORD ONSLOW RESPECTING THE DIMINUTION OF, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR THEIR PRESERVATION, &c.).

Presented to both Houses of the General Assembly by Command of His Excellency.

MEMORANDUM for the Hon. the PREMIER and the Hon. the MINISTER of LANDS respecting the Diminution of Native New Zealand Birds, &c., and Suggestions for their Preservation.

It is admitted by naturalists that New Zealand possesses in some respects the most interesting avifauna in the world. It is a melancholy fact that, under the changed condition of existence, this remarkable avifauna is passing away. Some of the species have already disappeared, whilst others are verging on extinction. Take, for example, the wingless birds of New Zealand. These diminutive representatives of the gigantic brevipennate birds which formerly inhabited New Zealand are objects of the highest interest to the natural-historian. The kiwis, like their colossal prototypes the moas, once existed in very considerable numbers in almost every part of the country. At the time of the first colonisation of New Zealand, fifty years ago, they were still abundant in all suitable localities. At the present day their last refuges may be indicated on the map without any difficulty. The North Island species (*Apteryx bulleri*) is still comparatively plentiful in the wooded heights of Pirongia and in the bosky groves of the Upper Wanganui. From all other localities where formerly numerous it has practically disappeared. The South Island kiwi (*Apteryx australis*) is now met with only in widely-scattered localities on the West Coast. The small spotted or grey kiwi (*Apteryx oweni*), of which perhaps thousands could have been obtained a few years back, has succumbed to the ravages of the stoat and weasel, the persecution by wild dogs, and the necessities of roving diggers, and it is only now to be found in any number along the lower wooded ranges of the Southern Alps. *Apteryx haasti* is one of our rarest species, and *Apteryx maxima* is strictly confined to the wooded parts of Stewart Island.

The kakapo, or ground-parrot (*Stringops habroptilus*), which was formerly so abundant in the wooded country along the whole of the West Coast Sounds and on the western slope of the Southern Alps, is becoming a scarce bird. According to Mr. Richardson, who recently read an exhaustive paper on the subject before the Otago Institute, both the kiwi and the kakapo are now confined to very restricted districts, within which, under the combined attacks of introduced wild dogs and cats, stoats, weasels, and ferrets, they are fast diminishing.

The blue-wattled crow and South Island thrush, which were every-day camp-visitors when Sir James Hector explored the West Coast in 1863, are now very rarely seen; whilst in the North Island the native thrush and some of the smaller birds have disappeared altogether.

Prominent writers on zoological science, such as Professor Newton, of Cambridge, Professor Flower, at the head of the British Museum, and Dr. Sclater, the accomplished secretary of the Zoological Society of London, have over and over again urged the importance of some steps being taken for the conservation of New Zealand birds; and they have pointed out that it will be a lasting reproach to the present generation of colonists if no attempt is made to save some—if only a remnant—of these expiring forms for the student of the future. Thus, Professor Newton, in his address to the Biological Section of the British Association, at Manchester, in 1887, saith: "I would ask you to bear in mind that these indigenous species of New Zealand are, with scarcely an exception, peculiar to the country, and, from every scientific point of view, of the most instructive

character. They supply a link with the past that, once lost, can never be recovered. It is therefore incumbent upon us to know all we can about them before they vanish. . . . The forms we are allowing to be killed off, being almost without exception ancient forms, are just those that will teach us more of the way in which life has spread over the globe than any other recent forms; and for the sake of posterity, as well as to escape its reproach, we ought to learn all we can about them before they go hence and are no more seen."

The chief cause of the destruction of native birds is no doubt the introduction of foreign animals, against which the indigenous species are unable to contend successfully in the struggle for existence, especially under the changed conditions of life brought about by colonisation. Probably the chief factor in this work of destruction is the Norway rat, whose introduction was of course unintentional, but an inevitable incident of settlement. The insectivorous and other birds introduced (whether wisely or not it is not necessary now to discuss) by our various acclimatisation societies have, as it were, driven out and replaced many of the native species. These latter have succumbed to some general law of nature under which races of animals and plants yield to foreign invasion and rapidly disappear, the aboriginal races of man being no exception to this general rule. Where the causes themselves are recondite, it is, of course, difficult to find the means of counteracting them; but it is an observed law of nature that expiring races survive and linger longest in insular areas. That has been the experience of zoologists all over the world, the islands of Mauritius and Rodriguez presenting a striking instance in point. Here in New Zealand we have many similar evidences. The remarkable tuatara lizard (*Sphenodon punctatum*), supposed to be a survival from a very ancient fauna, and constituting, *per se*, a distinct order of reptilia, which years ago became extinct on the mainland (chiefly through the ravages of introduced wild pigs), still exists in very considerable numbers on the small islands lying off our coasts. The makomako, or bell-bird (*Anthornis melanura*), at one time the very commonest of our birds, although still plentiful in the South Island, has absolutely disappeared from every part of the North Island, but it still exists on the wooded islands of the Hauraki Gulf and Bay of Plenty, and on the island of Kapiti, in Cook Strait. The same remarks apply with almost equal force to the wood-robin (*Miro albifrons*) and the white-head (*Clitonyx albigapilla*), two species which have never inhabited the South Island at all. The stitch-bird (*Pogonornis cineta*), which forms a sort of connecting-link with the avifauna of Australia, was thirty years ago very plentiful in the woods surrounding Wellington, but it had long before disappeared from the northern parts of the Island. It is now extinct all over the mainland, but it exists in comparative plenty on the Little Barrier Island—presumably the only locality in the world where this species is now to be found.

All these facts and considerations point to the conclusion that if, an attempt is to be made to preserve these and other indigenous species, it must be by setting apart suitable islands for the purpose, and placing them under very strict protective regulations.

Assuming it to be granted that it is the duty of the Government to take the necessary measures, the next question is, what islands are the most suitable for the purpose?

After making careful inquiries on the subject, and reading much that has been written by the Chief Surveyor and other local authorities, I have come to the conclusion that the two best and most readily available islands are the Little Barrier at the north and Resolution Island at the south.

1. *The Little Barrier*.—This island is still in the hands of the Maoris; but the Government is in negotiation for its purchase, and, as I understand there is only a small amount at issue between the parties, I would strongly urge its immediate acquisition for the purposes indicated. Not only is the Little Barrier known to be the habitat of the stitch-bird, the white-head, the bell-bird, and the native robin (all of which have practically disappeared from the mainland), but it has a wooded surface, admirably adapted to the habits of such birds; it is easily accessible from Auckland; it would be difficult for any person to land and shoot birds there without at once attracting the attention of the many ships which are constantly passing in and out of the Hauraki Gulf.

2. *Resolution Island*.—This has now been proclaimed a reserve for native fauna and flora.

(1.) Resolution Island is just at a convenient distance from the mainland. It is of considerable extent, with good harbours having deep water and safe anchorage.

(2.) Several of the species that it is most desirable to preserve (such as kakapo and kiwi) are known to exist there already in considerable numbers.

(3.) It is believed to be the final refuge of the great flightless rail (*Notornis mantelli*), only three specimens of which have ever been obtained in New Zealand, two of these being now in the National Museum, and the other in the Royal Museum at Dresden. One of those in the British Museum (obtained by Mr. Walter Mantell in 1849) was caught by a party of sealers at Duck Cove, on Resolution Island, and the other was captured by Maoris on Secretary Island, opposite to Dea's Cove, Thompson Sound. The third was taken as recently as 1881 by a party of rabbit-hunters in the vicinity of Lake Te Anau. There is every reason to believe that this rare and interesting species still survives on the island which has now been set apart as a permanent Government reserve.

Looking to the interests involved—the great loss to the scientific world implied in the extermination of natural forms that do not exist elsewhere, and the importance, therefore, of saving them—it cannot be denied that a heavy responsibility rests on those who, while there is yet time and opportunity, may neglect to take the necessary steps for their preservation.

All that is wanted to rouse public interest in such a matter is actual knowledge of the facts. There is a strong sentiment always in the public mind against the final extirpation of any living species. As a proof of this one has only to read of the strong public feeling that exists in San Francisco in regard to the protection of the "sea-lions" frequenting the famous Seal Rocks lying off the shore, and of the universal regret with which the Americans regard the almost complete extirpation of the herds of bison, of which at the present day only a small remnant survives under Government protection within certain "reservations." It finds further expression in the lament of all true

sportsmen and naturalists on account of the disappearance, through wanton slaughter, of the large game of South Africa. Look, for example, at the quagga, which is now on the verge of extinction. Forty years ago this fine animal might be counted by thousands on every valley and plain of the Cape Colony. At the present day, besides three mounted specimens in European museums, there are two living examples in the Zoological Gardens. Take these away, and the species is blotted out completely.

In urging Ministers to take this subject under their serious consideration I may remind them that on the 16th December, 1886, the Secretary of the Auckland Institute wrote advising the purchase of the Little Barrier Island as a Government preserve, and that the Premier, Sir Robert Stout, approved of this being done. The purchase was, I believe, strongly advocated by Professor Thomas and by Mr. A. Reischek, the Austrian collector, both of whom had visited the island and inspected every part of it. At a recent meeting of the Otago Institute a resolution was passed authorising the Council of that body to move the Government to proclaim, Resolution Island for this purpose.

Resolution Island having now been so proclaimed I would suggest that steps should be immediately taken for ascertaining to what extent Resolution Island is already stocked with kiwi and kakapo; that a sufficient supply of these and other birds be at once obtained by purchase or otherwise from the mainland before it is too late, and turned loose both on this island and on the Little Barrier; and that Captain Fairchild (who takes a keen interest in this project) should be instructed to call at these islands from time to time during the periodical cruises of the "Hinemoa," to ascertain if the birds are thriving, and to report results, with such practical suggestions and recommendations as he may be able to make for the furtherance of this plan of conservation.

I would also, at the same time, suggest that Ministers should take into consideration the propriety of including some other native birds in the list of protected species. As I have already mentioned, the bell-bird, formerly so plentiful, has entirely disappeared from the North Island. But it is still very plentiful all over the South Island, and is a common denizen of the gardens and shrubberies in all the principal towns. This is the bird that so enchanted Captain Cook by its song when his ship lay at anchor in Queen Charlotte Sound more than a hundred years ago, and, having become historical, it would be a grievous pity for the bird to die out altogether. The general testimony goes to show that the protection extended to the tuis had the desired effect, this species being now more numerous everywhere than it was fifteen years ago. Would it not be well to extend the same protection to its small congener the makomako, whose haunts and habits are almost precisely similar?

Then, again, there is a bird famous in Maori history and poetry—remarkable for its singular beauty, and interesting to naturalists on account of its aberrant generic characters—a species confined to a very limited portion of the North Island, from which, owing to the eagerness of natural-history collectors and the inevitable progress of settlement in its native woods, it is fast disappearing.

I refer, of course, to the huia (*Heteralocha acutirostris*), a bird which is naturally confined within such narrow geographical boundaries that I may describe its range as being limited to the Ruahine, Tararua, and Rimutaka Mountain-ranges, with their divergent spurs and the intervening wooded valleys. The white-tipped tail-feathers of this beautiful bird have been from time immemorial the chief adornment of Maori chiefs as head-plumes; and an incident connected therewith, in ancient times, led to the adoption of the name by the great ancestors of the Ngati-huia Tribe.

As Ministers are aware, when selecting a Maori name for my infant son, to commemorate his New Zealand birth, I was induced, for several considerations, to give this name the preference over all others submitted to me; and I should therefore accept it as a compliment to my family if Ministers would exercise the power they possess, and throw over this bird the shield of Government protection.*

I ask this the more readily on the ground that I have been moved to do so by the chiefs of the Ngati-huia Tribe. At the public function at Otaki, on the 12th September last, when I had the pleasure of presenting my son to the assembled tribes, a number of very complimentary speeches were made by the leading chiefs, and one of them, in referring to the name, said, "There, yonder, is the snow-clad Ruahine Range, the home of our favourite bird. We ask you, O Governor! to restrain the pakehas from shooting it, that when your boy grows up he may see the beautiful bird which bears his name."

The huia loves the deep shade of the forest, and as its home is invaded by the settler's axe it would, if protected from reckless destruction, simply retire higher up the wooded ranges, till it finally took refuge in the permanent forest reserve, which embraces all the wooded mountain-tops within its natural domain. Under vigilant protection, therefore, the huia would have every chance of being preserved and perpetuated.

Christchurch, Christmas Day, 1891.

ONSLow.

* This has been done: *vide New Zealand Gazette* of the 25th February, 1892, page 402.

SIR JAMES HECTOR,—

Please read and suggest any action you may think fit.
30th December, 1891.

J. BALLANCE.

Colonial Museum of New Zealand, Wellington, 11th January, 1892.

THE HON. THE PREMIER,—

His Excellency's memorandum clearly expresses the views which have been discussed and formulated by various scientific authorities. As Government has already made, or is making, the

desired provision for reserves, I do not see that more can be done except to take advantage of any opportunity that may occur of stocking the two islands that have been selected. This can be done most advantageously by enlisting the services of acclimatisation societies, as their members are the persons who have most interest in such work, and they possess the necessary organization.

If the Resolution Island Reserve were placed under the control of the Otago Society, and the Little Barrier Island Reserve (when acquired) under the Auckland Society, and in each case with a moderate subsidy contributed by Government, the work of conservation would be placed on a simple and efficient footing.

The Government might also, as His Excellency suggests, contribute material aid by lending the lighthouse tender for periodical inspection and transport of specimens.

I would recommend that the details of how the scheme is to be practically organized, and the amount of subsidy required, should be suggested by the societies, and that Government should enter into correspondence with them for the purpose of ascertaining how far they would be prepared to co-operate.

I would further recommend that His Excellency's memorandum be printed for public circulation.

JAMES HECTOR.

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