

NATIVE BIRD-LIFE IN ANCIENT MAORILAND.

(By GEO. GRAHAM.)

The native birds of this country were to the ancient Maori people an important factor in their daily life. So important indeed that the customs dealing with bird-life occupied quite a prominent part of Maori culture. These customs were based on various mythological beliefs, and were enforced by the strict observance accorded them.

Of the multiplicity of those old-time customs concerning bird-life I can now only briefly speak.

All things pertaining to the forests—the trees and plants and the bird-life—were the children of Tane, the God of Forests.

Then each forest had its particular subsidiary deity—a presiding, protective spirit; the forests, and the floral life as well as the bird-life therein, were under the tutelage of Tane, and that local subsidiary spirit.

Therefore, before certain observances were first fulfilled, no trees might be felled, foodstuffs gathered, or birds hunted within the forest.

For that purpose there was a fixed ritual—and an elaborate series of ceremonies was gone through to propitiate the Forest Spirits and Tane the Overlord.

Nor were any sylvan operations undertaken except in the season recognised as appropriate. Those seasonal restrictions were in themselves the result of the deep knowledge the Maori possessed of nature lore, and that was the outcome of keen observation over many generations of time.

All forests were within the definite areas of particular tribes, and their boundaries as between tribe and sub-tribe were defined as a matter of common knowledge. Rivers, ridges, mountain-peaks, and coast-lines marked those boundaries.

No unauthorised persons presumed to trespass therein. Such transgressions led indeed to penalties, and even inter-tribal wars. Thereof Maori history is all too replete with examples.

Thus it was that the protection of forests and the bird-life therein went hand-in-hand. The inter-relations thereof the Maori fully understood—and thereby the balance of nature was preserved.

Therefore in former days the Maori had his code, a recognised set of game and forestry laws. These laws had as their motive, the preservation of nature and the protection of the bird-life from indiscriminate slaughter.

Such laws were therefore the equivalent of the forestry and game-laws of our European ancestors.