

SOUTH ISLAND WOODHEN. WEKA.

Gallirallus australis.

Although there are several kinds of weka in the South Island, all are similar in habits to the one usually called the South Island weka. It is the common form in the north and west of the island and the only one on Stewart Island. The weka early became one of the best companions of the bushman and explorer, because of its lack of fear and incurable inquisitiveness. It is another example of a New Zealand bird which, although furnished with wings, is unable to fly. It does, however, use the wings when running. The short tail bobs up and down spasmodically when the bird is walking with slow deliberate step and bold confident appearance. The eyes are wonderfully sharp, ever on the lookout for food. Crickets, worms, grubs, lizards, snails, berries, mice, nothing comes amiss. It will even catch small fish in shallow water and take young rabbits from a warren. Nor are rats despised; once captured they are quickly skinned with the aid of feet and powerful beak.

The nest is built on or near the ground in a variety of situations; the actual site is often decided by the nearness of suitable food supply. In some places the birds breed only in the spring; in others breeding seems to take place nearly all the year round. The parents are devoted to the young, assisting them to feed until they are nearly full grown. If nesting is to take place again, the young birds are then driven to new territory.

It is difficult to account satisfactorily for the rapid decrease in the numbers of the weka, but various causes have combined to decimate them. Weasels and stoats will not attack the adults, but frequently rob the nests. Because of their incurable inquisitiveness, wekas commonly fall victims to opossum traps. Rabbit poison and fires have also done their share, but near civilization dogs are inveterate enemies. It is only in gorse thickets that wekas seem to be safe from dogs—an example of an introduced weed protecting a native bird.

The weka is of great economic importance, not only as a destroyer of insect pests and other vermin but also as a protector of the nests of other birds. The worst enemies of nesting birds are the black and the brown rat, and the weka is the declared enemy of the rat. In this connection we should give heed to this note of Guthrie-Smith:—"It is to such species as the crows, the robins, the warblers, the thrushes, the saddleback, the bush creeper, the yellowhead, the whitehead, the wrens, the tui, the bellbird, the pigeon, and the parrakeets, that the presence of the weka is an unmixed boon. If they still continue to survive, it is to his ceaseless vigilance, his policing of the woods, his eternal