

EXPLORERS DIARY OF 45 YEARS AGO.

The Waning of Beautiful Wild Life; a Contrast.

(By Arthur P. Harper)

IN THE EARLY NINETIES I had the privilege of working with the late C. E. Douglas in exploring, for the first time, some of the wild mountainous country of South Westland. Douglas was one of the great explorers of that part of New Zealand as well as a keen observer and naturalist. Amongst some notes of his in my possession he comments on the decrease in our Native birds which was noticeable even 45 years ago. He always expressed his views with a certain dry humour.

In dealing with imported birds he wrote:

"The Acclimatisation Societies' plan appears to have been to introduce a bird or beast, never mind it's nature and then in a few years to start poisoning them! Imported birds even when brought round the world still retain the hereditary instinct which for generations has protected them from cats, vermin, guns and small boys. They will continue to thrive where the native birds—who had no enemies—succumb."

There is much truth in this for the decrease, almost to extermination, of our bird life in South Westland has been due to such imported enemies as bird diseases, rats, cats and weasels—enemies entirely unknown to our birds in their original state. They have thus fallen easy victims.

When the West Coast became overrun with gold diggers in the 'sixties the bird life was wonderful. Wekas were exported by the Maoris in hundreds, to the North Island and did not appear to diminish as they were carefully preserved by the Natives.

Douglas talked of catching Roa's, the big Kiwi, which is a rare bird to-day. Even in 1895 they existed on the West Coast, for I heard their deep whistle in several localities—but, I never saw one. The ordinary grey Kiwi was very plentiful. Ducks were to be found in thousands, and the whole bush was alive with smaller birds. Unfortunately the digger liked his cat, but if he went off hurriedly, to a new find of Gold, the cat was left behind if not handy—result—numbers of wild cats spread over the low country.

By 1893 when I took up the exploration of some of the rivers of South Westland the bird life was

still plentiful, but according to Douglas the decrease was very serious—this was probably the work of cats.

In 1895 in my exploration of the Landsborough River I found that weasels had got through from the East and were obviously playing havoc. Such birds as Kakapo, Kiwis and Wekas were getting scarce in the district. We were the first men to go down the East side of that river so the decrease was certainly not due to man, while deer had not got into that country. The only bird which seemed able to make any sort of stand was the weka. If he saw the weasel first it was the weasel which suffered, and as to cats it is certain the wekas were responsible for the killing of many kittens.

The birds were of course an endless interest to us. They were tame and never having seen a man before were fearless. As forecasters of weather some were invaluable. We had to rely largely on makeshift shelters of bark or under rocks, so any warning of bad weather was welcome. A weka oiling his feathers was an infallible sign of coming rain. The bush canaries collecting in flocks and twittering forecasted a bad storm within twenty-four hours or so. All this added to the interest of penetrating this wild country for the first time. To-day that interest has gone. Let me give an instance.

In 1894-5, with a Maori, I was nineteen weeks from habitation exploring the Karangarua River watershed. We were the first men in this country. Kiwis were everywhere, never a night passed without hearing their whistles on all sides, Wekas took charge of every bivouac and camp. The Blue Mountain Ducks had their claims marked off, right up the river, on every inland lake several pairs of crested grebes could be seen. Kakas, Native Thrushes, that beautiful songster the Orange Wattle Crow, Saddle-backs, Tuis, King-fishers, Bell Birds, Canaries and the ubiquitous Robin—that quarrelsome little bird which only looks upon a man as one who kicks up grubs for him while blazing a track. In the beech forest country Kakapo were plentiful.

In 1929, with a party, I crossed from the Hermitage and again went down the Karangarua River—We saw one blue duck, two wekas, and heard one kiwi—We did not see or hear a single small bird in the bush and apparently the kakapo had disappeared—We did however see one weasel alive and one dead. This told the tale. The bush was still in its primeval condition. No deer, chamois or other such plant eating animal had yet got into the valley. What a silence and an emptiness there is in these places! Forty-five years have wrought their changes. What of the future?