

THE TAKAHEA *Notornis mantelli*.

(By Hugh Ross).

OCCUPYING a glass case in the Otago University Museum in the City of Dunedin is a bird not unlike the pukeko. It is a young female *Notornis mantelli*. The Maoris call it the Takahea.

In size principally the Takahea differs much from the Pukeko, being almost twice as heavily built. In colour, too, it differs. Although it has the red legs, beak comb and the white tuft under the tail similar to those of the Pukeko, the wings and body of the Takahea are blue whereas those parts are blackish in the Pukeko. Then, too, although the Takahea has wings it is flightless. For size its wings can be compared with those of the Kakapo, another flightless bird which is able to fly down from a tree; in reality it uses its wings only to ease its fall. If the Takahea uses its wings at all they would probably merely help the bird to balance while scurrying along the forest floor.

Environments different from those of the Pukeko are adopted by the Takahea. It apparently haunts the lonely forest aisles, in the neighbourhood of swampy ground.

Of its food habits very little is known. In accordance with its environment and the formation of its bill the food is almost certain to consist of vegetation. One *Notornis mantelli*, captured by Mr. John and Mr. Donald Ross, was examined and the stomach was found to contain the chewed grasses of leaves of the swamp nigger heads. Such a swamp was close to the scene of the bird's capture. Perhaps, like the swamp-hen, the Takahea also eats grubs and insects of marshy ground.

Seemingly they are nocturnal. The captured bird mentioned was heard to call several times a short while before daylight. The cry was difficult to imitate, but was described to me as being not unlike the double call of the Californian quail.

This rare bird was captured late the following afternoon by a Russian retriever in heavy bush land. When caught the bird struggled so vigorously that it succeeded in escaping for a moment, but was quickly seized again. So gamely did it fight that in the tussle the dog, which seldom injured any bird caught, broke

its breast-bone with the result that it died half an hour after capture.

Only four specimens of the Takahea are known to the world. All of these were taken in the provinces of Southland and Otago. In 1849 two were found. Both of these birds are now in the British Museum. A third specimen is now in the Dresden Museum. The fourth, the bird depicted on the cover picture, was caught on the 7th August, 1898. This, the best specimen of the four, is in the Dunedin Museum and is the only one retained by New Zealand.

And what has brought about the almost—if not complete—extermination of this wonderful and beautiful bird, said by the Maoris to be quite plentiful at one time? It is difficult to say. Certainly it must have been very rare even when the first white man came. The Takahea simply appears to have died out. Whether or not it is extinct is not known. Perhaps lone birds still inhabit the marshy forest floors far away from human haunts.

Editorial Note.—The spelling of the usual Maori name of this bird (Takahe) has been altered in the foregoing on the advice of Mr. James Cowan, the well known authority, who supplies the following information:—"Takahe," without the final "a," is an incorrect form of the native name of the *Notornis mantelli*. One bird-book compiler after another has copied the wrong spelling; none of the writers have gone to original sources—the Maoris of the far South, the last of the old learned men in Southland, bushmen and seal-hunters and bird-hunters of blended Ngati-Mamoe and Ngai-Tahe, gave me much information about the *Notornis mantelli* and its habits and haunts.

It is not advisable to indicate the locality; the collectors for glass cases are abroad in the land. All my Maori informants (over thirty years ago) gave the name as "Takahea," and said "Takahe" was some Pakeha's error.