

Some like it muddy

A FEW SUNDAYS ago I was driving with a friend along a straight stretch of Gray's Road, north of Pauatahanui. On both sides stretched mud flats and salt marshes, rush-covered swamps, and pools of water reflecting the grey sky. Dead boring. Until we looked closer.

When we did we discovered that it wasn't quite as dead as it seemed. A small group of pied stilts waded in the shallow water, obviously finding food. Sometimes two or three of them would sprint quickly across patches of dry ground as if their friends had found something tasty they wanted to share.

A white-fronted heron, with its chin well tucked back, flew across the inlet. Its wings were moving so slowly we wondered why it didn't crash. Ducks puddled around the edges of the mud banks and three swans headed out across the harbour. I guess they thought that at 500 m we were too close.

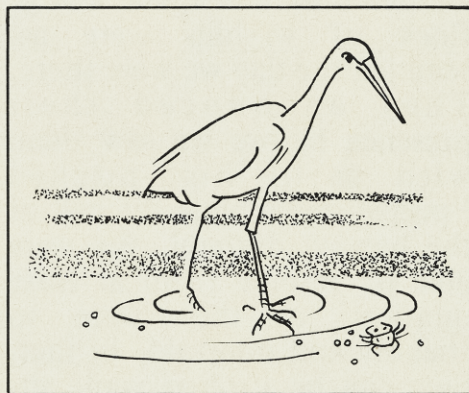
I could hear (but couldn't see) a kingfisher. Welcome swallows flitted across the pools hunting for insects, and black-backed gulls "squarked" past, hoping we were having a picnic.

I have been to Pauatahanui many times, as it is only about 30 km from my home in Wellington. There is always plenty to see if you know what to look for. Mallard ducks, spotless crakes, and pukekos are breeding there now, their nests hidden by clumps of

By David Gregorie

scrub, flax, or rushes. Skylarks will nest on the drier patches in the grass, and swallows will hide their mud-built nests under bridges, pipe drains, and overhanging banks.

Towards the end of summer the migratory birds — the godwits and the curlews — will spend the long days feeding in the shallow water, "fuelling-up" for their flight across the Pacific to Alaska or Siberia, where they will spend the northern summer.



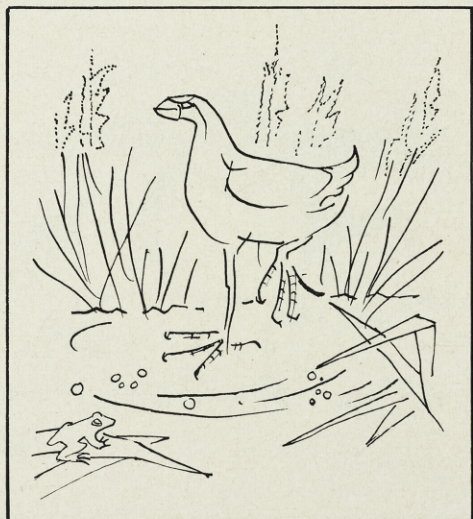
A white-fronted heron stalks crabs and other mud flat creatures.

The plants are worth more attention than they usually get. The flowerheads of the flax look magnificent at this time of the year, and the freshwater sedges on the margins of the marsh above the high tide mark have a weird brownish gold colour when you look over them against the light. The glass-worts are unexpectedly colourful, lurking in the shallow pools like part of an underwater rock garden. Just as well I had a pair of gumboots in the car.

My friend was getting bored. Sludging around in the mud and stopping in the most uncomfortable places to take photos didn't appeal to him. He wanted to know what use it all was — why they couldn't put a causeway across the marsh next to the sea and shorten the road by a couple of kilometres — why they didn't drain the marsh and put cows on it.

I explained that estuaries, salt marshes, and tidal flats are the only places where many wading birds can feed and breed and that many of the fish we like to eat feed and breed there too. No mud flats — no godwits, no fish 'n' chips.

The tide was right out, so we looked at the mud flats, not smooth, but covered all over with bumps and tiny mud volcanoes. The bumps are mud snails, and the volcanoes hide the burrows of worms and shellfish. There are hundreds of thousands of them — all good food for wading birds.



A pukeko in the dense vegetation around the reserve.

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