



New Zealand wetas are a group of fearsome looking insects distantly related to crickets and grasshoppers. They range in all sizes from spindly cave wetas to the larger bush wetas and at the heavy end of the range are the giant wetas.

Giant wetas are brown, with large heads and an aggressive appearance which belies their peaceful docile nature. If really worried to extraction they have been known to nip, otherwise they are more interested making for cover. They are too heavy to hop like the Bush and other wetas and just walk on all sixes wherever they go.

One weta, *Deinacrida rugosa* (the corrugated backed one) is a giant weta of the genus, *Deinacrida* in which there are six species, all giants and all in New Zealand. *D. rugosa* can grow to 75-77mm long and is endangered. It lives on the ground under forest duff or stones on Mana Island, Stephens Island and lately on Maud Island in the Marlborough Sounds where it was recently most successfully introduced. *Deinacrida rugosa* is thus a giant weta of the Cook Strait and mid New Zealand region.

Giant wetas prefer bush edge habitat among low scrub and muehlenbeckia and are solitary in nature. The females lay their eggs on the ground through a long rearward projecting scimitar like ovipositor. Unfortunately the tuataras of Stephens Island gobble up the females when they are exposed and immobilised, when laying their eggs and this has been going on for centuries, nevertheless *Deinacrida rugosa* has survived. However, with no such danger on Maud Island they have really expanded in numbers since introduction.

The giant wetas differ from all the other wetas because they have a life cycle of just over two years! Once they have mated and laid their eggs they die! Other wetas live for 12 to 14 years.

Deinacrida rugosa, in particular, is so docile that it does not even go in for fearsome displays as does the bush weta, it seems to have lost the aggressive instinct. 'In fact, it makes a very nice piece of meat for a predator.' M. Meads (*pers. comm*).

Giant wetas are not poisonous — they have no poison glands. They are such engaging insects that at least one has been made into a household pet in the past and pattered about a living room. They have six legs like other insects, but no wings and are among the largest insects in the world. *Deinacrida heteracantha*, which is pictured here, is 9.5cm long, is the heaviest insect in the world and at 78g weighs the same as the average song thrush! It lives in the North of New Zealand and on the Barrier Islands.

They are primarily vegetarian and have harriers and moreporks as main predators and of course the rats, wild cats and other introduced horrors for our wetas' life.

Wetas are considered to represent a very ancient group of insects and have not changed much from their ancestors whose fossil remains dating back 190 million years were discovered in Queensland in Triassic strata.

The fact that New Zealand has been isolated for so many millions of years probably accounts for the large number of endemic weta species that we now have in New Zealand.

So have a thought for the giant weta a unique and ancient New Zealander, now hard pressed for survival. Recognize that it just wants to munch away at leaves and threaten no one in its short little life.

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GIANT WETAS

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