


So people who demand that we should control stoats in our National Parks in order to protect the last of our native bush birds are really asking the impossible; it is totally impracticable (or at least, outrageously expensive) to achieve any real control over stoat populations, and even if it were possible, it is probably not necessary in the great majority of reserves, in which the native birds that remain have proved themselves able to cope with all the changes brought by the human invasion of their home — not only stoats, but also the loss and modification of the forest and the whole range of alien mammal and bird intruders. The only exceptions are the takahe and the North Island kokako, the only two endangered species on the mainland to whom stoats may still be a hazard. Even for these, stoat control is lower on the present list of management priorities than the bird's primary needs, which are for adequate secure habitat and food supplies; and no other endangered species on our list is threatened by stoats at all.

The verdict

Surprising though it may seem, the verdict must be that stoats are in fact responsible for relatively little damage to our bird populations, either in the past or the present. They have contributed to only a handful of extinctions, all in

Westland and Fiordland; as far as we know they have little effect on the densities of the surviving bush birds; and attempts to control them now would be unjustifiable everywhere except as part of the integrated programmes to save the takahe and North Island kokako. Stoats arrived long after the most vulnerable birds had already been removed by other predators, and the populations of birds that are left are controlled more often by other factors — normally habitat and food supplies — than by predation by stoats. There is a limit to the damage that predators can do, because only certain kinds of birds are vulnerable to it, but there is no effective limit to the damage that habitat destruction can do, because all birds are vulnerable to that. We should not waste our energy and resources worrying about stoats, while there are any native forests and wetlands still at risk. 

FOOTNOTE:

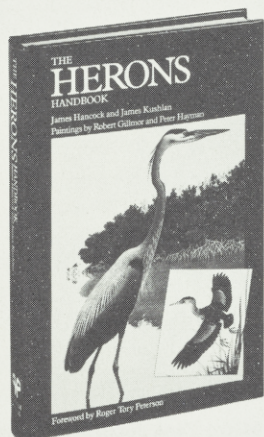
Further details and full references to the information in this article can be found in the author's recently published book. *Immigrant Killers: Introduced predators and the conservation of birds in New Zealand* (Oxford University Press, 1984). Carolyn King is the author of some 35 scientific papers on mustelids, and is an acknowledged expert on the stoat and weasel in particular. She has worked as a scientist with DSIR Ecology Division and the New Zealand National parks Authority, and is currently engaged in research at Pureora Forest Park for the Forest Service. Dr King is also scientific editor for the *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand*.

Dr King has presented the Society with recommendations on how we should deal with stoats and the threat they pose to native birdlife. No one is better qualified to offer this advice. Dr King's research in New Zealand has concentrated on the problems that concern us — the effect of stoats on their prey and the effectiveness of control measures on stoats. Few ecologists have been as conscientious in presenting their findings so promptly and clearly to those most concerned.

Her conclusions presented in this article may come as something of a shock. A blow to one's prejudice is always painful. Are we really to sit back and allow this alien predator continued freedom to kill our birdlife? Yet the facts appear that stoats on mainland New Zealand are, with few exceptions, no longer a threat to our birdlife and in turn our efforts to trap these animals are similarly ineffective. In brief, any damage stoats are capable of inflicting on bird populations will have already occurred. We have been well advised that our efforts to conserve birdlife should not be diverted from that of ensuring protection of their habitat. Any member interested in pursuing these theories and their ecological background will enjoy Dr King's recent book, *Immigrant Killers*.

Peter Gaze, Society member and ecologist.

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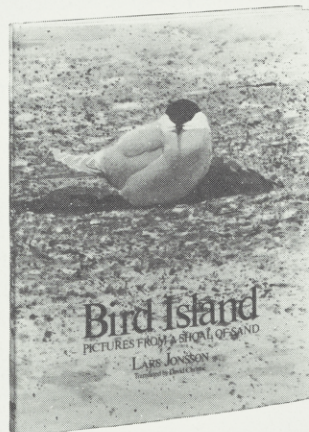


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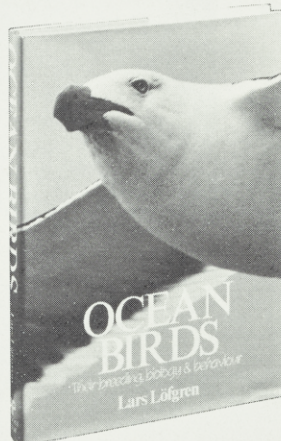


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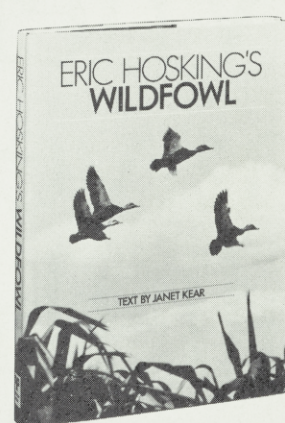


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