

THE WEKA

VICTIM OR VILLIAN

Could the weka, one of our more endearing native birds, thanks to its cheeky, fun loving nature, be a risk to Kapiti's little spotted kiwi population? The possibility was floated in the February issue of Forest and Bird. This article, by DSIR ecologist Ian Atkinson and Kapiti Island Lands and Survey Ranger Peter Daniel, challenges such a notion and the assumption behind it.

In recent years there has been an increasing tendency to treat the weka as if it were an introduced predator no different from the rat, cat or stoat. This prejudice is associated particularly with wekas introduced to islands where vulnerable species of birds, or their

eggs, are sometimes eaten by wekas. The prejudice is now appearing in print, as for example the articles in *Parkscape* December 1984 and the February 1985 edition of *Forest and Bird*. It has perhaps been stimulated by the campaign to rid Codfish Island of wekas, a campaign we fully support. In this instance there is proof that wekas introduced to that island threatened the survival of Cook's petrels, a seabird known to breed on only one other island.

The possibility of eradicating wekas from Kapiti Island has been raised by Mr Jim Jolly in the *Forest and Bird* article, as he believes they may threaten the survival of little spotted kiwis. In this case we think the argument is based on inferences and assumptions that should not go unchallenged.

Wekas were introduced to Kapiti Island around the turn of the century. Little spotted kiwis were not introduced until 1912 — although Mr Jolly raises

the possibility that they had persisted there from the last ice age. This seems unlikely, for Maori informants of early writers about Kapiti apparently made no mention of kiwis having been there and Cockayne, who spent 14 days on the island in 1906, suggested that "flightless birds of various kinds" should be introduced. Whatever their origin, it is clear that little spotted kiwis, if present on the island before 1912, must have been present in very small numbers.

Wekas were "everywhere" on Kapiti Island by 1924 when A. S. Wilkinson became caretaker of the island. Despite this presence of wekas, Wilkinson (1949) records that by 1924 little spotted kiwis had colonized the higher parts of the island above Rangatira and in the Te Rere and Kaiwharawhara basins. Since then both wekas and little spotted kiwis

Male weka feeding chicks

Photo: P. Daniel

