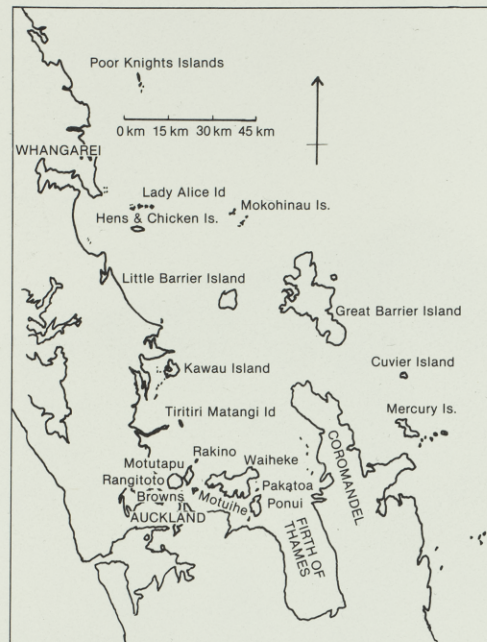


Looking towards Little Barrier Island (Hauturu). A school of dolphins plays in the middle distance.
Photo: Mark Bellingham

GULF COUNTRY



An as yet unnamed Mercury Island male weta. Some island wetas, such as that found on Little Barrier, can be as long as a mouse.

Photo: Mark Bellingham

Oliver's skink (*Cyclodina oliveri*) on the rat-free "Stack H" of the Mokohinau Islands. Less than a hectare in size, "Stack H" is possibly the only rat-free island left in the group.

Photo: Alison Davis



since a tuatara has been recorded there. Also on Little Barrier there is a record of 42 kinds of bush snail.

Nothing stays the same, even on an island sanctuary. Cats on Little Barrier wiped out thousands of petrels which once bred in burrows above its cliffs.

Yet an outstanding effort by wildlife rangers and conservation volunteers has recently rid the island of cats. Now it is being used as a place to put the last mainland survivors of endangered species. Kakapo, saddleback and kokako are among recent introductions.

At the same time the risk in the concentration, on just one island, of an endangered species has led to the spreading of rare birds about the islands of the Gulf to provide alternative populations. Saddlebacks, originally on Taranga (the Hen of Hen and Chickens Islands, off Whangarei) have been spread to other sanctuaries including the Chickens themselves (Lady Alice is one), Cuvier of Coromandel and now Little Barrier. In turn the stitchbird from Little Barrier, down to 300 survivors in the days of the cats, has been successfully introduced to Taranga, while at the same time its original population soared past 3000 on Little Barrier. On this island it often seems the birds are tame: whiteheads feed almost at ground level about the expedition hut; native pigeon graze on clover in the ranger's paddock, while flocks of red-crowned parakeet cackle through the trees.

Opening to the public

Most of these sanctuary islands are closed, to all but scientific expeditions, though qualified visitors have been

allowed on Little Barrier in recent years. The Hauraki Gulf Maritime Park Board, which administers many of the islands, recognises lay interest and is developing Tiritiri Matangi Island, within sight of Auckland, as a place where people may visit freely and see rare birds. Conservation folk are helping with a replanting programme on this island, formerly a farm. Already saddlebacks and parakeets can be observed on a day trip, besides the only northern population of bellbirds. The journey out, as any trip in the Gulf may do, provides the keen birdwatcher with the opportunity to see gannets, penguin, and any of the 12 kinds of petrel and shearwater which visit the islands of the gulf to breed.

There are two islands which are easy for visitors to reach, though time allowed ashore tends to be short during the week. One is Rangitoto, right in the middle of Auckland's downtown view, a recent volcano with fascinating plantlife. It looks covered in bush from the mainland and indeed there is a cloak of green over much of the island. The reality ashore, however, is of broken lava (wear boots for it's sharp) and high temperatures beyond the extending shade of the trees. Thousands of black-backed gulls nest there in spring, feeding on the city dumps of Auckland and commuting home to roost. On the bare rocks the beginning of life, algae and lichens, form a thin crust. Pohutukawa forms a sheltering canopy, creating some shade for ferns and orchids which, along with astelia and griselinia, here find a perch on the rocks. The roots of the trees go down many metres to reach a miniscus of water in the heart of the volcano. While there is no soil in the conventional sense, plants

thrive sufficiently on the pockets of decaying humus to support a population of wallaby, possums and a few fallow deer.

These animals may have originated from the introductions of Governor Sir George Grey, whose hideaway Mansion House on Kawau Island, is another favourite of visitors. Reached by boat, usually via Sandspit near Warkworth, Kawau is like a large letter E, with its deep arms drowned by the sea. Governor Grey, whose bizarre taste in plants and animals included the introduction of zebras, set in motion a process which has virtually stripped the island of its native species and replaced them with exotics. Largely kanuka, manuka or pines cover the island now, its remaining puriri and pohutukawa turning to skeletons under the final depredations of possums. Wallabies of several species graze out the settlers' gardens and keep native plants from regenerating. Around the Mansion House strange trees grow, including Chilean palms and other botanical souvenirs of Grey's colonial adventures.

Kawau is an ecological disaster yet a place of great charm and restfulness. As a demonstration of what the introduction of foreign species can do it is in direct contrast with the carefully sequestered sanctuaries of Little Barrier. Yet both serve to demonstrate the extremes and fascination of the world of islands which lie in view of the northern shores of New Zealand.

Footnote: Gordon Ell has visited the islands of the Kauraki Gulf as a wildlife film-maker and author of books, including *Wild Islands* and *Rangitoto*, both from Bush Press. He is presently national deputy president of the Society.