

Snipe *and the sword of Damocles*

By Colin Miskelly*



Male Chatham Island snipe, South East Island. About the size of a starling, this sub-species of snipe is now quite common on South East Island, and has been re-introduced to Mangere Island.

Few New Zealand birds are as unfamiliar to the public as our native snipe. Confined to isolated southern islands, snipe are usually overlooked by researchers and film crews, who focus their attention on larger and more conspicuous neighbours such as penguins, albatrosses and sealions. Yet these 'living fossils', far removed from other snipe species, are one of our most interesting endemic birds. Their present distribution symbolises the vulnerability of New Zealand's ecosystems to modification by man and his camp-followers.

New Zealand snipe belong to a large family which includes godwits, curlews, sandpipers and woodcocks. Most members of the family breed in the Northern Hemisphere, although many migrate to southern latitudes during the non-breeding season. The New Zealand snipe is the only species of the group that breeds in the Australasian region. It is thought to be a relict stock of a formerly widely distributed form, from which both modern snipe and woodcock arose. New Zealand snipe are considered the most primitive of the snipe-like birds.

Fearlessness is downfall

Shorter in leg and tail than other snipe spe-

cies, New Zealand snipe look more like small woodcock than true snipe. Each island group holds a separate subspecies, the forms differing in size and plumage. The Chatham Island snipe is smallest, being about the size of a starling, while the others are thrush-sized. They are all attractively marked with buff, russet and dark brown. The sexes are similar, but females are larger.

New Zealand snipe are confiding, usually flying only when pressed, and are easily caught with a handnet. During the day they are typically found among dense growth on the forest floor, or among tussock. Snipe are most active at night, when they venture into more exposed habitats to probe for worms and insects.

Some incubating birds are so tame that they remain sitting while their eggs are inspected. This fearlessness, and their low reproductive rate explain why snipe disappear so quickly following introductions of rats, cats and wekas.

Formerly widespread

Subfossil remains indicate that New Zealand snipe occurred throughout the three main islands and the Chatham Islands, as

well as on The Snares, Auckland and Antipodes Islands. Mainland snipes were presumably wiped out by kiore and kuri following Polynesian colonisation, as the only historical record is of a bird caught on Little Barrier Island in 1870 (before cats became established).

The Stewart Island snipe survived on offshore islands well into the 20th century, where it was observed by some of our early naturalists, including Guthrie-Smith, Edgar Stead, and Lance Richdale. The populations on Jacky Lees and Herekopare Islands, off Halfmoon Bay, disappeared during the 1920s following the introduction of wekas by muttonbirders. Several writers of the time commented on the vulnerability of snipe to introduced vermin. The prophetic words of Guthrie-Smith:

"though always hangs overhead the sword of Damocles; should rats obtain a footing, farewell to Snipe, Robin, Bush Wren and Saddleback, none of which species are able to adapt themselves to novel conditions",

were horribly realised when ship rats reached Big South Cape Island. Rat numbers reached plague proportions in 1963,