

## The Progress of extinction

The earliest Europeans to comment on the fate of the moa drew on Maori tradition and their own observations of the more populated North Island in suggesting that the bird had vanished there before disappearing from the South Island. The later exploration of the South Island by settlers and scientists confirmed this with the discovery of moa remains which seemed much fresher.

In the North Island the moa first disappeared from the far north, and from coastal areas; then progressively south. The bird seems to have lingered longest in the deep interior bounded by the King Country, the Wanganui and Taupo regions, and in the endless forests of the Wairarapa. The evidence for this is, however, only fragmentary, and only the general course of extinction can be suggested. Within the South Island, the moa was first exterminated from the eastern seaboard, from Marlborough down to Southland, then from most of Nelson and the West Coast, and from Central Otago. Post-European archaeological finds in Fiordland support Maori traditions that this region was the moa's last stronghold. Fiordland was also the final refuge for Maori tribes pushed south and west, by northern invaders.

There was some memory amongst the Maori of the progress of extinction. On the Auckland isthmus a woman of the late 1600s, Rangihau-moa, was so named because the day of her birth coincided with the last nest of moa eggs to be found in that

area. In the nineteenth century it was common wisdom that the last moa in the northern North Island had lived on top of Whakapunake, a mountain on the East Coast. In the south of the South Island, Beattie found a number of traditions concerning the last known birds of different localities. He was told the last moa in northern Southland, for instance, was supposedly killed on the Waimea Plain by one Parawhenua, sometime around 1800, while the last refuge of all was said to be 'in the area between Te Anau and Big Bay', on the West Coast. The archaeological record shows that moa numbers were severely reduced over most of the country by 1500 A.D., and very few moa hunter sites have been dated to later than 1600 A.D. Scientists have differed widely in their estimates of the date of extinction of the moa, but obviously as the bird became rarer, the corresponding kill sites did too, and very little of their evidence is available.

The succession of occupying tribes over the centuries – always descending from the north where the moa had already largely vanished – is a reasonable explanation for the very minor place of the moa in tradition and legend, and in place names and proverbs. This surprising absence is best summarised in the later chapters of Roger Duff's *The Moa Hunter period of Maori Culture*, yet there is strong evidence – traditional, archaeological and historical – that the moa was by no means extinct in the south of the South Island in the 1700s.

The extinction of the moa and other ground-dwelling birds is counter to prevailing attitudes that the Maori of old was a conservationist. Certainly this century the destructiveness of the Pakeha has been contrasted with the perceived care of the Maori for their lands and food resources. 'The Maori was always careful to conserve his food supplies, and to prevent fires from injuring or destroying his food-reservoirs, the forests. He had his closed season, the rahui, when no bird might be taken; would he not have his rahui for the moa?', asked the scholar J. C. Andersen. However, the clearance of the forests and the pre-European loss of 22 flightless bird species belies this image of their Polynesian ancestors. This is no special indictment of those people, but of human nature in general.

In the story of New Zealand then, Maori supplanted moa, and valley by valley, forest by forest, the big birds gave up their ground until at last their furthestest refuges were penetrated. There, at a time almost certainly after 1800, the last meal was made of moa and egg. ✎

*Barney Brewster has taken up where he left off in his "Moa's Ark" article in the May 1986 Forest and Bird. This article is abridged from the second chapter of his book Te Moa: the life and death of a unique bird, to be published in October.*

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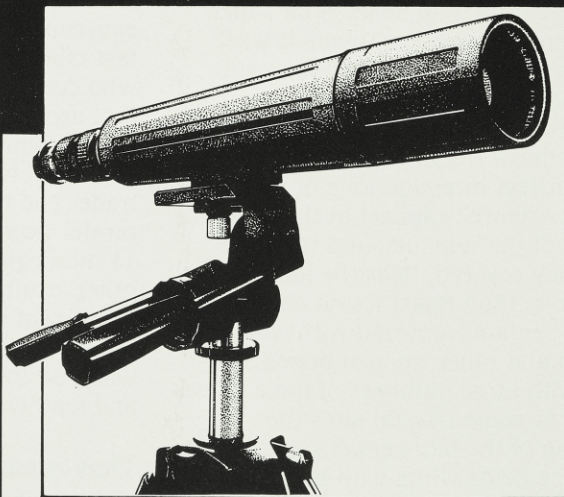


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