Does New Zealand Have Any Native Spiders?

New Zealand animals have always been a great source of discovery to naturalists both at home and abroad. The continuing struggle for the protection of native habitat and animals is constantly in our newspapers and on our television screens. But is it possible that the media portrait of New Zealand wildlife, although painted by compassionate and well meaning artists, is somewhat biased?

On deciding upon a topic for a conservation essay at post-graduate level, I found I was limited in my choice of focal animal. There was an abundance of literature available on a few animal groups such as endangered birds and to a lesser extent on some popular marine animals but there was a definite paucity of information on anything else.

I initially questioned my assumption that New Zealand was also home to a variety of native spiders and insects and thought perhaps our native land invertebrates were unworthy of attention. My particular interest were New Zealand spiders and what I was intrigued to discover was that there is an estimated 2,500 species of native spiders of which less than 750 species have been named and described.

So why is published information on New Zealand spiders so hard to come by? Perhaps our collection of spiders is rather boring, merely a compilation of internationally common species? On the contrary, New Zealand has a unique and fascinating spider fauna – incomparable to that found anywhere else in the world (see *New Zealand spiders: An introduction*. Forster, 1973) We have an unusually high proportion of primitive species and an extraordinary adaptive radiation from a few source groups. Many of our spiders are incredibly beautiful and a delight to observe.

These revelations led me to question my own concept of the New Zealand fauna. A rather focused approach by the media to stimulate public sympathy and awareness of conservation issues may have overemphasised some animal groups at the expense of others.

Trite planiceps *(family Salticidae), this small jumping spider is commonly found in shrubs in the North Island and warmer areas of the South Island.*

To illustrate the nature of this problem I designed a simple survey of 10 questions about New Zealand native animals. The subjects for this study were 100 students at Canterbury University. The students were randomly chosen, the only prerequisite being that they were New Zealanders born and bred. The questions were designed to investigate how students conceptualise the New Zealand native fauna.

As the results show, students at Canterbury University have an unrealistic concept of the New Zealand wildlife. Many students were unaware that New Zealand is the only home of a number of unusual insects and, sadly, some questioned the very existence of native spiders. It was discouraging to find that students were on average not particularly interested in discovering native insects. Some respondents went as far as to comment that they actively try to avoid them! Neither did students value the ability to identify anything they might accidentally find, unless it has feathers. The native bird species most commonly known by students are predictable. Unfortunately the only endemic spider known to students is also the only poisonous one and although attractive is seldom seen.

What then are we to think about public awareness of native wildlife in New Zealand ? Perhaps the students I surveyed are less exposed to information about native wildlife than the general public. I think not.

The retreating forest and bush takes to its death not only a few bird species but a host of less conspicuous but by no means less important small creatures. Introduced animals prey upon and compete with the native vertebrates. Indiscriminate use of pesticides in our water systems and sprayed upon our land has a negative impact on many species of native animals – big and small.

The indigenous landscape is home to many animals, not just a few birds. Let's widen our horizons and discover some of the facts about the environment in which we live and most importantly let's share them with others in a more realistic portrayal of what it is we are fighting to protect – the whole ecosystem.

Karen Bowden

The survey given to 100 Canterbury University students. Where appropriate the correct answer is marked with an asterisk. The responses are given below the questions and the most common response **highlighted.**

1. Does New Zealand have an unusual collection of native birds?
   Y*/N/DON'T KNOW
   (**100**/0/0)

2. Does New Zealand have an unusual collection of native insects?
   Y*/N/DON'T KNOW
   (**60**/26/14)

3. Are any New Zealand bird species endangered?
   Y*/N/DON'T KNOW
   (**98**/2/0)
   if so, how many? (circle the closest approximate answer.)
   5 10 20* 50
   (16 **37** 28 19)

4. Are any New Zealand insect species endangered?
   Y*/N/DON'T KNOW
   (28/13/**59**)
   if so, how many? (circle the closest approximate answer)
   5 10 20 50*
   (**16** 10 2 0)

5. How many species of birds live in New Zealand and nowhere else?
   circle the closest approximate answer.
   0 10 20 100* 500 1000
   (16 14 19 **36** 15)

6. How many species of spider live in New Zealand and nowhere else?
   circle the closest approximate answer.
   0 10 20 100 500 1000*
   (16 **38** 26 13 45 2)

7. When tramping or camping do you look for native birds?
   Y/N
   (**75**/25)

8. When tramping or camping do you look for native insects?
   Y/N
   (19/**81**)

9. Do you know the common names of any native birds?
   Y/N
   (**86**/14)
   Please list: average # listed by an individual; **6.15**
   The species most commonly named; kiwi, tui, kea, bellbird, fantail

10. Do you know the common names of any native spiders?
    Y/N
    (**52**/48)
    Please list: average # listed by an individual; **1**
    Most commonly named; katipo.