

A Winter's Tale



Even in the middle of a windswept winter, Stephens Island in Cook Strait teems with curious and eye-catching wildlife. Photographer Brian Enting spent three nights there in July 1990 and illustrates some of his memorable encounters...

LYING at the western entrance to Cook Strait about 110 km west of Levin, Stephens Island is a wildlife sanctuary of exceptional importance. Captain Cook named it in 1770 in Honour of Phillip Stephens, Secretary of the British Admiralty, but never went ashore. The island was visited periodically by local Maori, the Ngati Koata, in search of the island's rich seabird harvest (kaimanu), and it also had significance to the tribe as a boundary marker of a gift of land from another tribe. The island's Maori name Takapourewa (floating matipou trees), as well as reports by naturalist Ernst Dieffenbach in

1843, indicate that Stephens Island was once forested on all but the rocky, encircling cliffs. However, a lighthouse was constructed between 1892-1894 and the combination of forest clearance, wind and salt spray and unrestricted roaming by introduced stock led to rapid loss of about 90-percent of the forest cover. Today, the southern two-thirds of the island above the clifftops is regenerating in a mosaic of scrub, vinelands, silver tussock and herbfields, aided by deliberate strip-plantings of taupata made in the 1950s-1970s by the Wildlife Service. Most of the remaining area above the cliffs is still grazed by sheep while plans for revegetation are formulated. The lighthouse was automated in 1989 and a Department of Conservation officer and his family now reside on the island.

Photographer: Brian Enting
Captions: Alison Cree