

THE MYSTERY OF THE VANISHING WEKA



North Island weka on nest. The peak of the weka's breeding season is July and August, and incubation takes 25 to 27 days.

EARLY SETTLERS called it the woodhen, and spoke affectionately of its amusing antics and annoying habits. Last century weka were numerous and very tame, and could readily be encouraged into homes and camps. Their curiosity was engaging, but less endearing was their habit of stealing bright objects like watches and jewellery!

The weka is one of our most personable endemic birds, and quite a tough customer. Flightless it may be, but its strong legs and stout beak make it a formidable fighter and predator. Weka eat almost anything. In forests they scratch for insects, worms and fallen fruit amongst the leaf litter. In farmland they

eat seeds, foliage, fruit, grass grubs and wire worms, making up for the maize and tomatoes they enjoy. Weka scavenge dead animals, catch rats and mice and sometimes take baby birds. On the coast they skewer sandhoppers, shellfish and storm-cast food.

Weka can learn to like new foods. During the possum eradication programme on Kapiti Island, weka added possum carcasses to their diet. Early Maori introduced weka to Codfish Islands as a source of live food. There, the weka learnt so efficiently to kill the burrowing Cooks petrels, that the weka themselves had to be eradicated.

They live in many habitats: alpine tussock grassland, forest and shrubland, swamp, sand dunes and rocky coast, and settled farm land with gorse and hedgerows for cover.

Weka would seem to have a lot going for them, and last century they were abundant throughout the North and South Islands. Yet today, the North Island weka, *Gallirallus australis greyi*, has almost disappeared.

Scant records show the following picture:

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| Early 19th century | – Weka occurred throughout the North Island. |
| Late 19th century | – Declining but still abundant in many areas. |
| 1920s | – Reduced to Northland and Poverty Bay and perhaps the King Country. |
| 1924 | – Northland population plummeted, only isolated populations remained. |

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| 1950s | – Northland population extinct. |
| 1970s | – Weka introduced to Kawau Island. |
| 1986 | – Major decline in Poverty Bay, population split into two, at Gisborne and Motu. |
| 1990 | – Gisborne and Motu populations recovering, Kawau Island weka decline severely. |

Why did the Weka decline?

Nobody knows for sure, but there are a number of theories.

Some put it down to loss of habitat and competition for food from introduced animals, particularly possums. These factors have had a disastrous effect on many native species, but the versatile weka might have been expected to cope. After all, another native rail, the pukeko, thrives in our cultural landscape.

A critical food shortage at some time of the year may be a factor. Early settlers spoke of weka migrations - masses of thin, scabby weka moving across country, often in time of drought.

Introduced predators

Around the turn of the century, waves of invading predators swept through the North Island, and may be associated with the dramatic decline of many species. However, weka can defend themselves much better

Weka Sub-species

THERE ARE FOUR SUB-SPECIES of weka: the North Island weka, the Western weka of Nelson, Marlborough and the West Coast, the Buff weka of Canterbury and the Stewart Island weka.

The Buff weka narrowly escaped extinction. In 1905 it was introduced to the Chatham Islands, where it flourishes to this day, but back in its home range in Canterbury it died out in 1924. In 1962 Buff wekas from the Chatham Islands were taken back to Arthur's Pass National Park, but did not survive.