

A new shearwater on the Chathams

IN JANUARY 1990, Department of Conservation workers, Ron Nilsson and Jill West, were mystified by an unusual looking seabird which they caught at night on South East Island in the Chatham group. The bird was similar to a muttonbird or sooty shearwater, but instead of being dark below like a normal muttonbird, it was white underneath. On closer examination they noted other differences – its tail was longer and it was much lighter in weight.

Not wanting to harm the emaciated bird, they released it, after taking measurements and recording plumage details. They concluded that it was either a very peculiar and partly albinistic sooty shearwater or a species previously unknown to science. Unfortunately, it was later found dead.

The bird was sent to the National Museum in Wellington, where its skin and skeleton were preserved. Various seabird authorities examined the specimen and after debate decided that the bird was almost certainly a new species of shearwater. Not only were its plumage and measurements unique, but its skeleton was also quite distinct.

These days it is very unusual to discover a new species of bird. However, scientists are fairly confident the Chatham bird is distinct because amongst shearwaters, there are no records of different species hybridising and there is little variation amongst individuals in populations.

I was a member of a DoC expedition studying petrels on South East Island this



National Museum biologist, Phil Millener, compares the apparently new shearwater species from the Chatham Islands (left), with the common sooty shearwater. Photo: Evening Post.

January. We searched for more of the unusual shearwaters but did not see any. If further birds are found, the species' identity will be more certain and a conservation strategy can be formed.

The story of the new shearwater may parallel that of the endangered Chatham Island taiko, which was rediscovered by David Crockett and his team in 1973. The taiko survived, unseen by researchers, for more than 100 years after being first scientifically described in 1867. Petrels and

shearwaters come ashore only at night and breed in long burrows. Therefore they can easily go unnoticed. It appears that the new shearwater has been overlooked until now.

The discovery highlights again the unique nature of the animals and plants that have evolved on the Chatham Islands. Only time will tell what the future holds for the new shearwater, but let's hope that some more are found soon. ✕

Alan Tennyson

B.O.O.K R.E.V.I.E.W.S

Pingao – the Golden Sand Sedge

by Averil Herbert and Jenny Oliphant
(Nga Puna Waihangā)

THIS EXCELLENT 32-page booklet brings together the art, weaving traditions, legends and natural history of pingao. Authors Averil Herbert and Jenny Oliphant have also documented the efforts of weavers, Maori groups and conservationists to replant dunelands in pingao. Their booklet outlines replanting projects throughout New Zealand and gives clear instructions on how to propagate and plant out pingao.

Produced by Nga Puna Waihangā (the Maori artists and writers' runanga), and launched at their national council meeting in May, the booklet is available direct from the Forest and Bird mail order for \$9.95 (see catalogue).

North West Nelson Tramping Guide

by Derek Shaw (\$19.95, Nikau Press).

OVER THE YEARS Nikau Press have quietly been building up a track record as a publisher of quality guide books to the natural areas of the northern South Island.

This latest addition to their publication list will be welcomed both by those who already know that North West Nelson is a trapper's paradise and those who so far have heard of it only by reputation. More ambitious than the other guides (there is much more territory to cover) the 100-page book is more than simply a guide. It also contains sections on the diverse flora and fauna, the complex geology, and the human history of the areas a trapper would pass through.

Few know the North West Nelson wilderness as intimately as Derek Shaw. Those planning their next tramping holiday to the region would be wise to invest in the book before they set out.

The book can be bought for \$19.95 direct from Nikau Press, PO Box 602, Nelson.


99 New Zealand Birds

by Don Hadden (\$29.95, The Caxton Press).

THE AIM of this attractive book is to introduce readers to the birds they are most likely to see, although some rarities such as the takahe and black stilt have been included.

A member of the Ornithological Society, Don Hadden has some striking images, particularly of bush birds such as the rifleman, tomtit and yellowhead.

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