

Welcome the new native?

NEW ZEALAND HAS a new native bird – from Australia.

The Nankeen night heron (*Nycticorax caledonicus*) has been confirmed as breeding – at Jerusalem on the Whanganui River. Under the Wildlife Act a self-introduced bird receives automatic status and protection as a New Zealand native.

The heron has never before been confirmed as breeding in New Zealand. They've been spotted around the country either in pairs or singly but not in the Wanganui area until two years ago, when up to a dozen were seen in an area between Hipango Park and Pipiriki. Only last November was DoC able to confirm that it bred there.

Despite DoC's description of the discovery of the breeding population as an "exciting find", the establishment of the heron and its inclusion as a protected native species raises some interesting questions. Should self-introduced species of birds gain this automatic and venerable status? There is no information at this stage as to how the heron might impact on more established native fauna, but presumably it already competes with indigenous birds and other animals for food and resources.

A sizeable proportion of the New Zealand avifauna comprises birds that have close relatives in Australia and that have arrived here with the help of the prevailing westerly winds and currents. In evolutionary terms they are recent additions to the New Zealand native biota. Such birds include the kotuku or white heron, morepork, harrier hawk and pukeko. Their arrival in our environment is part of the natural process of change that all ecosystems undergo and no one would quarrel with their genuine status as native birds.

But there is a growing group of arrivals from across the Tasman that have established breeding populations only since the major human-induced environmental changes of the past 200 years. There are at least ten such birds including the royal spoonbill, white-faced heron, silvereye, welcome swallow, black-fronted dotterel, hoary-headed grebe and spur-winged plover. Due to the recentness of their arrival, and the likely on-going recruitment from Australia, most of these birds are genetically indistinct from their Australian relatives.

An average of a new species every 20 years is well above what one would expect as the

natural rate of self-introduction. Obviously if New Zealand was still a country of predominantly dense rainforest, rather than predominantly open pasture, then species such as the spur-winged plover which prefer the latter habitat would have been less likely to have established breeding populations.

It is possible also that habitat changes in Australia, creating large populations of certain advantaged species have contributed to the increase in arrivals here.

One might question whether there is a useful ecological distinction between the deliberate introduction of a bird such as the magpie, or changing the environment with the result that another species can gain a foothold and thrive.

The recent sighting near Auckland of spur-winged plovers destroying eggs of New Zealand dotterel – total population under 2,000 – suggests more discriminating criteria might be needed in providing Wildlife Act protections.

Certainly in the damaged natural world of Aotearoa, the status of self-introduced birds should be considered case by case, especially in relation to their impacts on this country's threatened endemic fauna.

Ian Close

and interest them in natural science and conservation?

A couple of suggestions are being canvassed.

One is a club for adolescents. A successful model might be the Hamilton Junior Naturalists, a very successful group for eleven to seventeen year olds. Weekly meetings with a variety of speakers regularly attract thirty members. On day trips and camps, members explore the countryside, collect data, and monitor species. A focal point and destination is Te Kauri, near Raglan, their very own lodge and bush reserve. While members help with the organisation, the continuing success of the club depends on the enthusiasm and charisma of a few adult leaders.

Clubs such as these could be fostered in different parts of the country.

The second idea is to make use of the rapidly growing arena of electronic media, specifically the Internet, a form of communication adopted avidly by young people. It is an avenue offering a door into every school and an increasing number of homes in New Zealand.

Using *Forest & Bird* and *Conservation News* as sources, real conservation case studies could be provided for teachers and students to discuss. This would be well researched, provocative, and updated monthly. Conservation is a part of the biology and geography syllabuses, and increasingly should connect with economics, commerce and engineering. While the format lacks the intimacy of a "club", it has the advantages of being available to a wide audience.

The two ideas complement one another, with electronic media providing a ready means of communication between individuals, clubs, schools and *Forest and Bird*.

Joe Crandle (executive member) and Ann Graeme (KCC coordinator) would welcome your ideas.

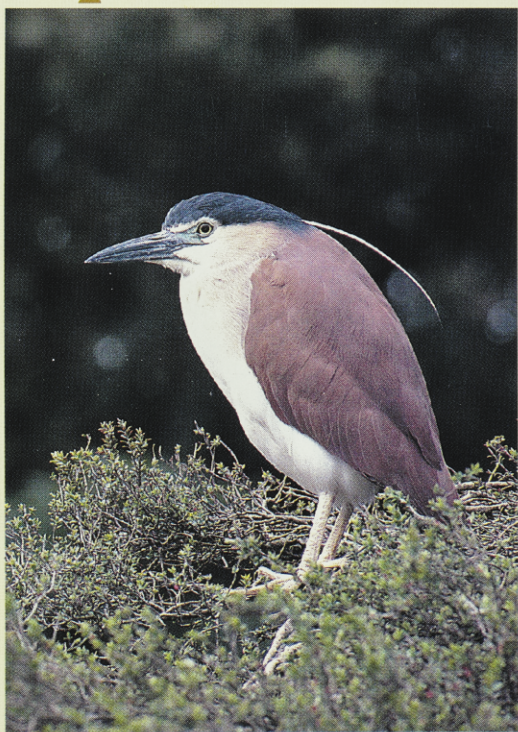
Write to them c/- Box 631, Wellington.

Is there life after KCC?

CONSERVATION needs young people. Forest and Bird recognised this need when, in 1988, members voted to set up a children's conservation group. The Kiwi Conservation Club was born, and has grown to its present membership of 6,000, including 700 schools, with about 30 local clubs offering nature activities and family outings.

But KCC caters only for children, not for teenagers. KCC leaders watch with regret as children outgrow the club, and drift away. These young people will be choosing careers and forming opinions which will shape their lives. What can *Forest and Bird* offer to inform

The Nankeen or rufous night heron roosting in a tree. The birds are native to Australia, New Guinea, Indonesia, the Philippines (and now) New Zealand. Largely nocturnal, the birds favour the edges of swamps, inlets and rivers. They feed on a wide range of fish, frogs, crustaceans and insects. Overseas they are reported to sometimes plunder the nests of other birds, destroying their eggs and young.



ROD MORRIS