

Whitebait enigma



koaro

WHITEBAITING – that symbol of New Zealand life. Can there be any pastime that so exquisitely combines high excitement and dreamy boredom? It's all about the little, silvery fish streaming into the net, into the bucket, and into the frypan. But those tiny fish have a story to tell far beyond the wildest dreams of the whitebaiter.

The whitebait that escape the nets swim on up river. They are not a single species, but the young of five native freshwater fish – inanga, koaro, and three species of kokopu. These fish all belong to the southern hemisphere family Galaxiidae. Kokopu are found only in New Zealand while koaro are also found in south-eastern Australia. Inanga, occurring also in Australia and South America, are one of the most widely distributed freshwater fish in the world.

Galaxiids get their name from the profusion of spots on the first species described, which were fancied to resemble that galaxy of stars we call the Milky Way.

By far the most numerous among the whitebait are the young inanga, swimming upstream to grow into adulthood in rivers, lakes and swamps. Inanga cannot climb even small falls or long rapids, so they do not venture far inland. Neither does the shy, nocturnal giant kokopu

whose young seek swamps and creeks overhung with flax and raupo, tree-lined banks and sunken logs where they can skulk and hide during the day.

On the other hand, the young of the koaro, the banded kokopu and the rare shortjawed kokopu are agile climbers, scaling vertical rock faces and turbulent falls to reach small creeks sometimes far inland. They can only live in undisturbed streams edged with native forest or shrubland (or tussock, for the koaro), and their populations reflect their diminished habitat.

Mystery still surrounds the lives of these secretive native fish. Recent studies have revealed the extraordinary breeding habits of the banded kokopu which in heavy rain leave the stream to spawn in the forest litter. Their eggs lie dormant until the next rain, when they hatch and the tiny fish wriggle through the leaves back into the stream.

Best-studied of the galaxiids is the inanga – for the obvious reason that their young make up most of the whitebait we eat. In autumn, sensing the coming of the full or new moon, adult inanga migrate downstream into estuaries. They congregate in the salt marshes or along the grassy riverbanks, awaiting the high tides associated with the lunar cycle. The tide floods over the banks. Almost high and dry, the fish writhe and wriggle in the grasses and rushes, laying their eggs deep

banded kokopu

shortjawed kokopu

inanga

inanga