



DICK VEITCH, DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION

*The tiny rock wren eats insects and grubs.*



ROD MORRIS, DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION

*This rock wren is nesting in the base of a mountain flax.*

introduced rats and stoats. The last recorded sightings were about 1955 in the North, and the 1960s in the South. Stead's bush wren was common on Stewart Island and several outlying islands, but by the 1960s survived only on Big South Cape Island. In 1964 the wreck of a fishing boat allowed ship rats to invade the island, and the desperate transfer the next year of a few remaining birds to a nearby rat-free island was unsuccessful.

There remain the rifleman, the smallest of the group, which is apparently holding its own, especially in the South Island, though in reduced numbers, and the rock wren.

The rock wren is known mainly by mountaineers and trampers of the alpine tops of the Southern Alps, from northwest Nelson down to Fiordland. Its name is apt as its preferred habitat is areas of jumbled fallen rocks with crevices and airholes, preferably interspersed with subalpine scrub. The birds hop around on and under the rocks, with much bobbing and flicking of the wings, as they search for insects and grubs.

A few years ago I heard there was a concentrated population in the Henderson Basin, near the top of the Cobb Valley inland from Takaka in the Kahurangi National Park. I made my way up there a couple of times and managed to see some birds, but not in the numbers I was expecting, so in 1999 I spent a couple of days camping there to try and estimate the numbers.

I found three pairs, all with one or two young, and possibly two more pairs; a lot