

# ABOUT KIWIS

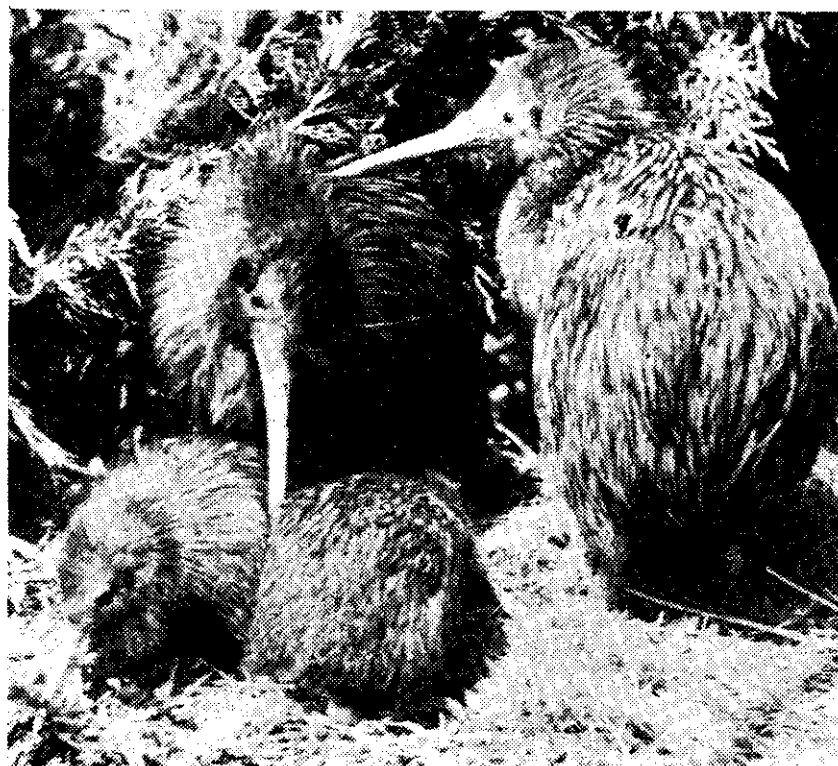
(Written for "The Listener" by  
DR. R. A. FALLA, Director of the  
Canterbury Museum)

THIS article I hasten to say is about a little known bird, and not about its countrymen who have lately carried the name to many parts of the world where it had never been heard of. It would be interesting to know how many New Zealanders serving overseas were asked for information about their emblematic bird, and still more interesting to have a summary of the information they were able to give. It is a certainty that incorrigible leg-pullers had a good innings, and a possibility that some of the better-intentioned informants were just as misleading. From whatever source, there is no doubt that inaccuracies on the subject of kiwis do gain currency. There were several in an otherwise good article published lately in an American magazine, and it is not so very long since I overheard a guide lecturer in the South Kensington Natural History Museum telling an impressed school-group that the New Zealand Kiwi was a bird that laid an egg larger than itself.

We are so familiar with representations of the bird, more or less easily recognised, on coins, badges, coats of arms, and trade-marks, that we are apt to forget how little most of us know about its distribution and habits. It is commonly stated that it is on the verge of extinction, but that is not so. A rough classification recognises three kinds of kiwi. The Brown Kiwi, with representatives in North, South and Stewart Islands, is of dark plumage, coarse in texture, pattern mainly streaky. The North Islander occurs in fair numbers still in North Auckland and across the central belt from Taranaki to Hawke's Bay. The Stewart Island bird is common, but the South Island Brown Kiwi is rare. In addition are found two rather different kiwis, the Large Spotted Kiwi and the Little Grey Kiwi. They have softer plumage, the pattern being dark-barred or light spotted according to the stage of moult. Both occur in western districts from Nelson to Otago and the larger one in the higher foothills of Canterbury.

## Completely Nocturnal

This distribution and their present day numbers would give everybody a good chance of becoming acquainted with kiwis if it were not for their extraordinary habits. They are so completely nocturnal that it is almost useless to look for them by day except with a dog, a practice definitely not to be encouraged. At night they sometimes call, a thin reedy cry which does not carry far, and to follow them up in thick undergrowth with a torch is like chasing a will-o-the-wisp. It has been found that attempts



Above: The Napier Kiwi family

to exhibit them to the public in captivity are unsatisfactory because as a rule only a sick kiwi will wander about in daylight. However, under proper conditions they thrive in confinement and have even been able to breed. The latest—not the first, as claimed—of such successes has been the hatching of kiwi chicks by their own parents at the Hawke's Bay Acclimatisation Society's game farm at Greenmeadows last year. They have been held in confinement under permit there for some years and the principal and staff are to be congratulated on their success.

## Female Emancipation

The bushcraft and patience of our field naturalists have so far not been sufficient to disclose all the details of kiwi domestic life. It was known that the hen bird weighing little more than four pounds could produce at a sitting an egg one pound in weight—indeed usually two of them at a reasonable interval. It was suspected that she lost interest at this stage and left the whole tedious business of sitting to her mate. This seems to have been a quaint primitive custom, for it is followed by the emu also, and no doubt the moas did it too before they too became extinct. The Hawke's Bay event now confirms what this may mean to the cock bird—a stretch of about 80 days before the eggs chip, and then a prospect of looking after the chicks by himself. Male kiwis must in this respect be well-trained, for there is official record of one in the London Zoo which in 1868 sat on infertile eggs for 114 days before he realised that he was wasting his time.

It now becomes clear that the bird we have chosen as a national emblem has some claims to distinction. It must be admitted that the kiwi has no wings, no tail, untidy feathers, poor eyesight, unmusical voice and a small brain; but its one-track mind is capable of perseverance at least, as the species seems to have evolved a high degree of female emancipation long before the suffrage legislation appeared on our statute books.

Below: Mr. Kiwi, with half his job finished



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