

An Ornithologist Visits the Notornis

IF you were Director of a Museum, and you got news that a bird of very exceptional interest which you feared was extinct had been re-discovered, you would experience a real thrill. If you were also an ornithologist, and you were despatched to inspect the find, you would reach the summit of professional bliss. This is the very happy position of Dr. R. A. Falla, Director of the Dominion Museum. Following the finding of the notornis in the country west of Te Anau, and the immediate steps taken by the Government to protect the bird, Dr. Falla went to the scene at the request of the Department of Internal Affairs, to report on the notornis as an ornithologist. He was accompanied by two officials of the Department and the party was guided by Dr. Orbell, who discovered the notornis colony. When we saw Dr. Falla at the Museum on his return, he was still excited as a result of what he had seen—and no wonder.

"Only a few weeks ago," said Dr. Falla, "zoologists were considering the notornis academically, and poring over the plates in Buller's *Birds*. Then came the discovery, and the whole zoological world is interested. For instance, a research man at the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard, writes saying that the news is 'too good to be true.' A Danish zoologist who is coming to the Science Congress at Auckland, comments: 'What a magnificent preparation your country has made for welcoming zoologists.'"

Brilliant Colouring

Mention of Buller's *Birds* led up to the first point Dr. Falla made about the notornis, after actually seeing the bird. That is its brilliancy of appearance. He put the first and second editions of Buller on the table. The plates in the first edition were re-coloured by hand by the artist after they were printed, but not those in the second. Buller's first edition notornis is much more like the real bird than is the second. It shows the indigo colour on head and breast. The

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fiddle to suit various conditions—full of power for big orchestral work, and lighter for chamber music."

There is one small part of a violin which the player rarely bothers about once it is adjusted to his liking, and which the audience never sees. Appropriately, the French call it the "soul of the violin." It is the sound-post, which is hidden away inside the instrument. Not even scientists, according to Mr. Meier, can agree on just what the sound-post does, but without it a violin would not sound like a violin. He remembers a famous visiting artist who was constantly experimenting with the sound-post. Every time he moved it he changed the tone. "He brought the instrument to me; I adjusted it and sent him away with the advice to leave it alone."

Mr. Meier added that there were some very fine instruments in the National Orchestra of the NZBS—a Gagliano, a G. B. Guadagnini, a Rugerius, an Ombono Stradivari, and a Chanot, to name only a few. All told, the string instruments of the orchestra were worth a good many thousands of pounds.



DR. R. A. FALLA
"The whole zoological world is interested"

notornis, says Dr. Falla, is reminiscent of the peacock. After the drab appearance of New Zealand birds generally, it is quite startling to see this tropically brilliant creature. On the body, indigo gives place to peacock blue and olive. There is red on the beak, which is scarlet at the base, lightens to a rose shade, and then darkens again at the top. The original artists were handicapped because they had only dried and faded specimens to work on.

Dr. Falla and his party saw about 20 birds in the area of the discovery, to which they were led by Dr. Orbell, but there was evidence that there might have been five times as many. So far as can be seen, the diet is very restricted—mainly snow-grass, a wiry grass that grows at 3,000 feet or more. They watched the birds eat, and a curious sight it was. The notornis would put his foot on a tuft of snow-grass and bring it level with the ground. Then he would chop it off at about ground level with his beak, eat the succulent ends, and throw the rest of the tuft away. The area was littered with these discarded tufts, like a half-mown field. Even the droppings were extraordinary in their nature, and much has to be learned about the digestive processes of the bird.

Some of the birds were bigger than others, continued Dr. Falla, but whether the male or the female is the larger could not be determined. The birds have wings, which they spread out to balance themselves in running over open country, but they don't fly. The nests are larger and more compactly made than those of the pukeko. They are on dry ground, and not very well protected from enemies. No hawks were seen about, but there were traces of deer. The notornis shares the area with only a few birds.

Why was the notornis so long in being re-discovered? Whatever may have happened formerly, the remnants are now restricted to isolated pockets. Moreover in the kind of country in which the notornis has been found there is not much to attract persons not specially looking for the bird. Deer-stalkers would be liable to overlook it. Also this is high country, and the few earlier specimens were found at lower levels. These

were undoubtedly strays. People suspected the existence of a bird, but were not quite sure whether it was a pukeko or a notornis. Dr. Falla paid a warm tribute to the enterprise and organisation Dr. Orbell had shown in re-discovering the bird.

Films Will Be Screened

There is a strong likelihood of other colonies being found. We know now what the notornis call is like, it is loud and can be heard a long way off. Also there are the characteristic droppings and discarded leaf bundles. There is a great deal to be learned about the bird. It has been observed only in summer. In winter the snow-grass would be covered with snow, and indications are that then the notornis goes into the bush or descends to lower levels. Dr. Falla considers that while the colony should be disturbed as little as possible, it seems to be in the interests of the birds that the area or areas should be inspected regularly for vermin and general conditions. The policy of restricting entry into the area till more is known is a right one. In practice there is no serious obstruction to legitimate traffic in the area under the system of permit. Judging by their habits as observed, the birds are ill-adapted to live under the disturbed conditions that prevail over most of New Zealand.

Any other possible discoveries or re-discoveries, we asked (with the expedition to the George Sound district in mind) and Dr. Falla mentioned the laughing owl, believed to be almost extinct, and the South Island thrush.

Finally, he said, New Zealanders would have an opportunity of seeing the notornis in moving coloured photographs, for the films Dr. Orbell took would be available for general screening.



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