

a little, and, after a plunge in the icy stream, we were soon enjoying the meal which had been awaiting us since mid-day.

At Home With the Birds

At last we were in the takahe country. Many people have asked my impressions of this isolated valley and to all my reply has been the same—it was just like being in another world. Had a moa walked out of the bush I would have been interested, but hardly surprised. Huge limestone cliffs rear up on either side of the entrance; the clear stream rushes down from the lake amid a tumble of huge boulders; the lonely little lake formed obviously by glacial action gin-clear at the sides, but dipping straight down farther out so that the great depth makes the water appear inky-black; the jagged peaks of the Murchison Range at the head of the valley; the glorious alpine vegetation, at its best at this time of the year and hardly touched by deer; the flanking beech forest; the calling of keas; it was wild New Zealand at its best.

Of course all hands were keen to start the search for the birds. But Dr. Orbell, who was in charge of the expedition, decided that it was important that the birds be not alarmed and, in case there were only a few of them present, the first chance of seeing them should go to those doing serious work. And so Dr. Orbell, Dr. Falla, and I left an envious but cheerful company at the camp and went up the lake side in the evening light. Success came almost immediately. Several birds were sighted and others heard, the deep throaty alarm call echoing eerily across the lake. We found, also, what we had not expected, a number of nests, and these were obviously fresh. This presented a puzzle. Did the nests belong to male birds, "squats" such as pukeko use? Had the birds not yet laid their egg or eggs? Were the nests tenanted by birds or chicks which had moved off at our approach? We had to leave the area owing to the failing light, but with the decision to return at daylight.

Our news cheered those we had left waiting, and plans were made for the morrow. By the light of the fire pipes were smoked and tales told and retold. Then sleeping bags on top of several layers of beech twigs felt good after the toil and excitement of the day. Kiwis calling round the camp could not keep us awake for long.

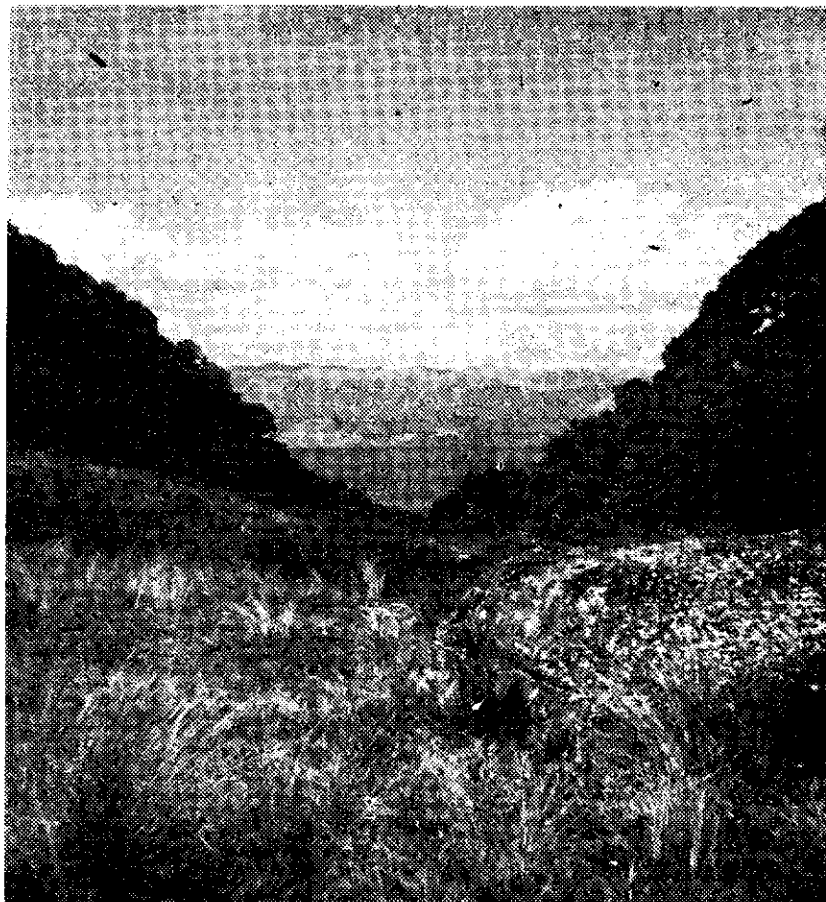
Our Takahe Chick

All too soon it was daylight again and, grubby and stiff, the three of us were again among the birds in the wet tussock some two to three feet tall. A system of signals had been arranged so that any member could inform the others of what was found. We commenced a "beat" across the tussock slope on the side of the lake. My line of approach led me to a nest I had discovered the night before and, as I drew near, I found that it was occupied by a sitting bird. The correct signals were given and we converged on the nest. Soon we were within a few feet and all three wondering just what to do next.



Should we attempt to catch the bird or not? The question was solved when we were only two feet away by the sitting bird leaving the nest hurriedly and, to our intense surprise, out on our side came a young chick. This we did capture although, being so close and all so eager, we almost lost it in the tall tussock by getting in one another's way.

And then occurred one of the most delightful happenings I have ever seen in all my study of birds. The chick protested vigorously and set up a shrill cheeping; the parent, which had disappeared, and could only be heard giving alarm signals at a distance, reappeared and circled us at close range. Hitherto the adult birds had shown a decided disinclination for human company, but maternal solicitude overcame all fear and gave us the opportunity to see the adult at close range and to take many pictures, both still and movie. Because this was the first takahe chick ever seen, at least by a pakeha, it was necessary to obtain sketches, photographs, colour notes, and measurements. We knew just how disappointed those at the camp would be at having missed seeing a chick and, partly to let them see it but mainly because the measuring instruments were left behind in the morning rush, it was decided to take the little bird back with us. We reasoned that the parent would not desert the locality for several hours and so "junior" was carefully carried back to the camp, admired by all, had all necessary measurements taken, and was then placed in an empty carton whilst we breakfasted and told our tale. (To be continued)



THE LAND OF THE TAKAHE: Two photographs from the area west of Te Anau. The view above, looking back towards Te Anau, was taken from the saddle seen in the top left corner of the upper photograph. The latter shows the lonely mountain lake where Dr. Orbell first saw the notornis. On page six Dr. Orbell (right) is seen with Dr. Falla and the notornis chick.