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# Finding an ‘Extinct’ New Zealand Bird

Rediscovered by a Persevering Doctor,  
the Flightless, Colorful Takahe, or ‘Wanderer’,  
Struggles to Survive

- By R. V. Francis Smith

# NEW ZEALAND



In New Zealand's rugged Fiordland a bird thought extinct for fifty years is struggling for survival. Behind the rare species in its fight for life is all the protective power of the Dominion Government.

Rediscovery of this flightless bird, the large, brilliant-hued native rail which the Maoris called takahea, meaning 'wandering at large,' excited almost as much interest in New Zealand as discovery of a living passenger pigeon would arouse in America.

To zoologists and bird lovers throughout the world, reappearance of takahea, now called the takahe, was a notable event. They had a scientific name for the creature—*Notornis hochstetteri*, the first half of which means 'bird of the south'—but they knew tantalizingly little about it and had considered it lost in the limbo of vanished species.

To the rediscoverer, Dr. G. B. Orbell, a physician of Invercargill, New Zealand, the dramatic sight of a takahe alive came as the reward of years of patient and systematic search. Only four of the birds were known to science when he made his discovery on the shore of a lake in what is now called Notornis Valley. Since August, 1898, there had been no authentic report of one being caught, or even seen.

Long-lost *Notornis hochstetteri* gave its name to remote Notornis Valley where the flightless bird was rediscovered beside this nameless lake.



# A Thirty-Year Quest Begins

Dr. Orbells interest in the creature began more than thirty years ago when, as a boy, he found an old photograph showing the museum bird in a case. His mother told its story and explained that the bird was supposed to be extinct.

That word "supposed" stimulated Dr. Orbells adventurous spirit, and he learned all he could about the species. From game rangers and from men who had probed the fastnesses of Fiordland, from hearsay and from stories told around campfires on numerous hunting trips, Dr. Orbell picked up fragments of information about possible takahe hiding places.

In 1945 Dr. Orbell built a summer home at Lake Te Anau, where two of the birds had been caught. The question of the takahe's existence and whereabouts was always with him, but he seldom mentioned the matter except jokingly or as a bait to catch information. In this way he learned that a man who knew the country round about always carried his rifle loaded when in a certain area.

The man said with a knowing air:

"It might be worth £400 to £500."



# Severe Winters Limit Food

From observations over three nesting seasons, it seems that most, if not all, of the birds in the main Notornis Valley breed yearly, but very few chicks are hatched and raised. In the 1949-50 season, 40 percent of the observed eggs were totally infertile, only three chicks were hatched, and by February, 1950, only one remained alive. It is now known, however, that several birds besides those under observation were nesting.

The availability of snow grass and other food during severe winters, when the area is deeply covered with snow, is an important factor in the survival of the species. A dead adult bird, untouched by predators, was found in the main valley in the spring of 1949. This and other complete skeletons have suggested that starvation is a not uncommon cause of death.

Every endeavor is being made to preserve these contemporaries of New Zealand's extinct giant moa, swan, and eagle, interesting creatures sorely missed. But if measures to combat predators prove ineffective, if nesting shelter and food suffer serious depletion, if a severe winter strikes, or if infertility increases—if anyone or a combination of these mishaps overtakes back-to-the-wall notornis—then the species must inevitably join the heath hen, the dodo, the great auk, and others that are lost to the world forever.

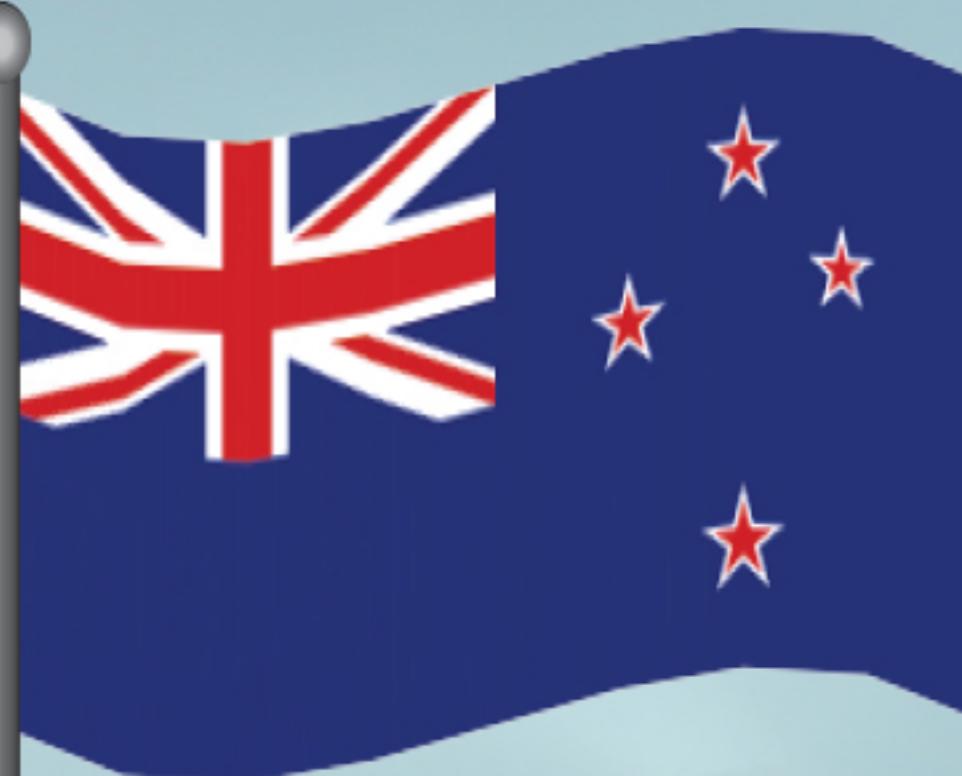




Want to know  
more about  
New Zealand?



# New Zealand Facts



New Zealand is a fertile and mountainous group of islands in the southwestern Pacific Ocean. 'It is a land uplifted high,' wrote Abel Tasman, a Dutch navigator who was the first European to sight New Zealand, in 1642. Snowy peaks, fjord-scarred shores, and pastures dotted with sheep define this country.

New Zealand, a parliamentary democracy modeled on that of the United Kingdom, has been a self-governing British dominion since 1907. It became a founding member of the British Commonwealth in 1926.

One in three citizens-Kiwis-lives in or around the city of Auckland. Rugby clubs with names such as Canterbury and Wellington reveal a nation peopled mostly by descendants of British settlers. The indigenous Maori constitute about 15 percent of New Zealanders; recent immigrants-primarily from Samoa and Fiji-make Auckland one of the world's largest Polynesian cities.

The export-driven country, whose chief trading partner used to be the United Kingdom, faltered in 1973 when Britain joined the European Union. The loss of preferential treatment prompted a search for new markets. Japan, Australia, and the U.S. now buy half of all exports, which include wool, mutton, lamb, beef, cheese, fish, and chemicals.

New Zealand plays an active role in helping democratic nations and emerging Pacific island economies. It sent troops to East Timor when violence broke out in 1999, and it provided millions of dollars to the South Pacific island of Niue after it was devastated by a tropical cyclone in 2004. Niue and the Cook Islands enjoy a status of self-government in free association with New Zealand.

# New Zealand Facts



Population: 4,107,000

Capital: Wellington: 343,000

Area: 270,534 Squared Kilometers

Languages: English, Maori

Religions: Roman Catholic, Protestant

Currency: NZ Dollar

Life Expectancy: 78



GDP per Capita: USD \$20,100

Literacy Percent: 99



See, in the National Geographic Magazine: "The Columbus of the Pacific: Captain James Cook," by J. R. Hildebrand, January, 1927; and "Tuatara: 'Living Fossils' Walk on Well-Nigh Inaccessible Rocky Islands off the Coast of New Zealand," by Frieda Cobb Blanchard, May, 1935.

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