

For the Junior Members

Bird Life in Otago - Then and Now

(by GRAND-DAD)

In earlier numbers of *Provincial Pride* I have told the boys and girls of some of the ways in which life in Otago a century ago differed from life today. Even the animals and birds our pioneer grandparents were accustomed to see were quite different too, from those we see to-day. The birds they knew were all native to New Zealand whereas the land birds we see most commonly today have almost all been introduced into New Zealand.

As the early settlers cut down the tall trees for timber to build their homes and cleared the bush for land on which to grow their crops, the bush birds were quickly driven back from the settled areas, and today many birds once common in and near Dunedin are only to be found in forested areas far removed from the haunts of men. The finest account of the bird life about Dunedin in the first years of settlement is that recorded by the Hon. G. M. Thomson in "The Naturalists' Calendar."

He observes : "Kakas were abundant in those days both in the bush and in the open, where they dug at the roots of the spear-grass and flax for the large grubs and beetles to be found there, or visited the flax flowers for nectar, and the snowberry and ground tutu for their fruit. Parakeets also fed freely on the berries while tuis and korimakos (bell birds) visited the flowers for nectar, and made the air vocal with their bell-like notes ; wekas, grass birds (fern birds) and (native) quail (now also quite extinct) were abundant on the open ground or in the dense scrubby undergrowth; while native canaries, saddle-backs, wrens, warblers, robins, tomtits and flycatchers (fantails) were then as common as sparrows are today.

In the denser vegetation of the ravines kiwis, ground thrushes, and crows were abundant... while on the upper foliage the silent woodpigeons were very common, feeding in spring and early summer on the kowhai leaves and later in the season on the berries of mistletoe and the turpentiney fruits of the miro and other pine-trees. The smaller birds too fed on the berries of the hina-hina (mahoe), pepper tree, mako-mako (wineberry) and poro-poro and thus spread their seeds far and wide." "Where," he asks, "have all these birds gone?"

It is recorded that during fine days in Summer, church services at Green Island Bush were sometimes held in the open air while kakas screeched, red-fronted parakeets chattered,, and pigeons cooed in the trees nearby. Of the various birds named by the Hon. G. M. Thomson the kakas, parakeets, saddlebacks, wekas, kiwis, and crows have all left this area and are now to be seen only in forested areas remote from all human habitation. The more-pork is now rarely if ever heard near Dunedin and the bush hawk or falcon has quite disappeared. It was so fond of poultry that residents shot it whenever they had the chance. Bush pigeons were so plentiful and made such delicious pigeon pie that their numbers were quickly thinned, but a few still persist near Dunedin and at Taieri Mouth. Though it is now protected by act of Parliament, I recently came on a heap of feathers at Taieri Beach indicating that someone still liked pigeon pie.

Swamp birds remain the same, but pukekos and bitterns are now present in very reduced numbers. Both were once common at South Dunedin and on the Kaikorai Swamp. Shore birds, sea-birds, and waders remain the same today as formerly, and swimming birds (mostly ducks) have had the additions of the Mallard duck and the black swan. The fern bird is now known locally only from the swampy shores of Lake Tuakitoto near Kaitangata.

For the first years of the Otago settlement all local birds were native to New Zealand; but many of the early settlers felt it would be nice to introduce some of the birds they were Used to seeing in Scotland and so the recently formed Otago Acclimatisation Society between 1865 and 1871 introduced first the blackbird and the thrush (1865), then the sparrow (1866), then the skylark, starling, and goldfinch (1867), and in 1868 the chaffinch, redpoll,

greenfinch, and yellowhammer as well as that pest of the farmer—the rabbit. Most of these birds thrived and multiplied, but some in time became pests and the German owl was introduced to control the sparrows—ferrets, stoats and weasels to control the rabbit. The rat was an accidental introduction but rats, wild cats, stoats and weasels have proved a menace to our native birds, ground birds in particular, because they destroyed both the eggs and the young birds.

In the earlier days wheat crops were sometimes destroyed by hordes of caterpillars (so called army worms) and the sparrow by feeding on the caterpillars made successful wheat growing (in Canterbury at any rate) possible ; but, having beaten the caterpillar, the sparrow has since taken more than adequate tribute from the ripening wheat crop, and in its turn has had to be controlled. At one time in Canterbury army worms crossing the railway line rendered the rails so slippery that trains were brought to a halt.

Starlings have their faults too but they have proved valuable in controlling insect pests on the farm. I can recall a pair of starlings building a nest eight feet high which reached from the floor of an old barn to a hole under the roof before the eggs were laid. Thrushes and blackbirds have proved a pest to the orchardist and gardener and are largely responsible for the spread of such undesirable plants as elderberry, blackberry, and briar, for the seeds after passing through their bodies are still able to sprout wherever they are dropped. Few native birds are now seen near our homes other than an occasional native pigeon, tui, bellbird, fantail, or warbler which leave the forest when food is scarce. The native robin is still plentiful in some areas but is now either very rare or absent from the neighbourhood of Dunedin. A small colony of Rosella parrots in recent years was established on the slopes of Mt. Cargill but may now have disappeared. I last saw Rosellas in the Botanic Gardens some three years ago. An occasional kingfisher may still be seen near the inlets on Otago Peninsula and both the albatross and the yellow eyed penguin continue to breed on the Peninsula. On rare occasions a white heron visits the area.

Well, boys and girls, you will see that even the bird-life of Otago has been completely changed since Otago was colonized over a century ago, and especially since such predators as the rat, stoat and weasel were introduced. Finally, it may interest you to know that the Auckland Provincial Government in 1864 offered the sum of 30/- for every pair of thrushes, or blackbirds, or sparrows to any new settler who cared to bring them to New Zealand. The Canterbury Acclimatization Society were not quite so generous as they offered only 2/- for a pair of thrushes, blackbirds, or skylarks, but 15/- for every pair of house-sparrows or hedge-sparrows. The common little wax-eye arrived in New Zealand from Australia long before the early settlers of Otago, but it is not quite certain how it got here.