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A likely association of the New Zealand Owlet-nightjar (*Megaegotheles novaezealandiae* Scarlett) with early humans in New Zealand

The New Zealand Owlet-nightjar (*Megaegotheles novaezealandiae*) was described by Scarlett (1968) and is recorded in the 1990 New Zealand checklist (Turbott 1990) as being not known from middens and therefore possibly extinct before the human occupation of New Zealand.

Scarlett (1968) listed the sites from which, at that time, *Megaegotheles* bones had been recovered. Most of these sites are typically sinkholes or swamp, which would have been natural traps for a bird which was almost, if not wholly, flightless (Rich & Scarlett 1976). Two sites however, are open-fronted limestone rockshelters in which the bones were recovered from a floor deposit; here these birds could not have died as a result of being trapped. One of the rockshelters (Frenchman's Gully, Timaru) yielded only one partial bone. From the other, however, in Weka Pass, North Canterbury, a number of *Megaegotheles* bones were excavated by Scarlett on two separate occasions in 1961.

Bones of a number of other species, mostly birds, were also recovered from this shelter. Scarlett (1969) published the following species list (species as named by him): Kiwi, Finsch's Duck, Giant Goose, large hawk, Little Weka, South Island Weka, coot-like bird (*Pyramida hodgini*), pigeon, small Kaka, Kakapo, Red-crowned Parakeet, South Island Thrush, Tui, South Island Kokako, South Island Saddleback, Bellbird, New Zealand Pipit, Cook's Petrel, Mottled Petrel, Fluttering Shearwater, Polynesian rat, tuatara,

gecko lizard; also moa eggshell. In the same paper, Scarlett said that these birds "presumably nested in the rockshelter where their bones were found". However, surely most if not all of the species cited above are highly unlikely to have been nesting in such a place.

This list did not include *Megaegotheles*, although its bones were recovered at the same time, the book having gone to press before Scarlett recognised and described the species.

In the osteology catalogues housed at Canterbury Museum, Scarlett later noted, when cataloguing the material from the Weka Pass shelter, that bone had been recovered from a 'burnt layer'.

In early 1969, during an archeological survey of rockshelters in the Weka Pass area to locate Maori rock drawings, I visited the shelter excavated by Scarlett, accompanied by Michael Trotter, Canterbury Museum archaeologist. Red and black prehistoric drawings were found on the shelter roof, and Trotter carried out a test excavation in the floor deposit, recording the results in his fieldbook (Trotter, unpublished).

A definite archaeological layer was at a depth of 15-25 centimetres, with burnt stones, charcoal, bird and rat bone and freshwater mussel shell. This was a typical midden deposit, attributable to human occupation of the shelter and in keeping with the presence of rock drawings. All bones located at the time were in this layer, some of them burnt; there was no naturally occurring bone in the shelter floor.

It seems likely that all the material recovered by Scarlett was also derived from the midden layer. The subsequent identification of *Megaegothles novaezealandiae* as part of that assemblage suggests that this is the first recorded instance of the New Zealand Owlet-nightjar in association with human activity.

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