SHORT NOTE

Status of the weka *Gallirallus australis* on Cape Brett, Bay of Islands

On 21-24 February 1987 I visited the Cape Brett area to ascertain the status and distribution of the weka population resulting from the birds liberated at Rawhiti between 1967 and 1972 (Edgar 1972, Robertson 1976). Figure 1 summarises the locations where most wekas were found by Robertson in 1976, the locations where wekas were seen or heard in this survey, the probable routes of spread since 1976, and the area I traversed during this survey.

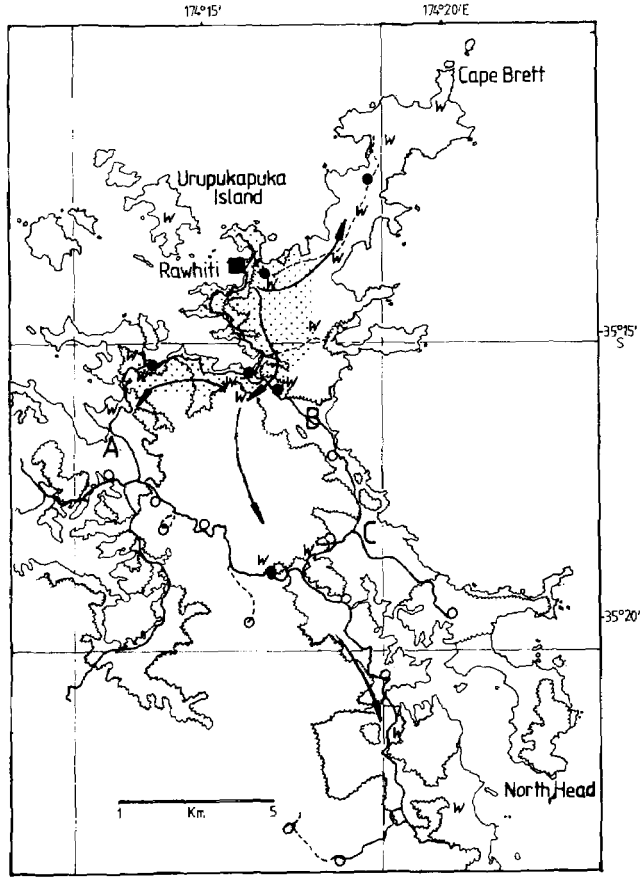

FIGURE 1. Cape Brett weka distribution and probable routes of disperal. - - = Survey route traversed on foot, —o— = Survey route traversed by car. A = Clendon Cove, B = Elliot Bay, C = Ngaiotonga, —► = Proposed dispersal route, W = Weka located, ● = Location from which wekas were located, O = Location where no wekas were located, ■ = Weka liberation point. Shaded area represents the range of the majority of the population in 1976 (after Robertson 1976).

Results show a considerable spread of wekas and indicate changes in density in the last decade. Robertson found that the highest concentration of wekas was around Rawhiti in 1976, but I found the highest density at Waipiro Bay, 10 km by land to the south-west of Rawhiti. In 1976 Robertson estimated the number of wekas to be more than 95, because he considered that many wekas were not taking part in 'spacing call' (Beauchamp 1987) choruses, and he had not surveyed the total range of the birds (North Head to Cape Brett). I consider the present population to be no more than 400 birds. Weka density is probably being influenced by cyanide poisoning for possums because poison laid in the same way is known to have been partly responsible for major reductions (> 40%) in the number of resident territorial wekas at Double Cove in the Marlborough Sounds over the last 6 months.

My survey also indicated that wekas were spreading south, but had been stationary in the north-west, at Clendon Cove, since 1977 (Calvert 1977). Over the past 18 months occasional birds have been seen at Oakura and Punaruku (J. Gardiner, pers. comm.). The spread of wekas appears to have been hindered by the relatively pure grassland areas at Clendon Cove, Elliot Bay, and Ngaiotonga. Consequently, wekas have not spread on to the Russell peninsula and few have been recorded on the Whangaruku peninsula (Robertson 1976). The Bay of Islands Maritime Park Board also released wekas on Urupukapuka Island, and subsequently birds apparently spread from Urupukapuka Island to Motukiekie Island (Crockett 1972, Goodwin 1972). They are still present on Urupukapuka Island, and birds liberated nearby at Opua before 1978 (Calvert 1978) are still found in an area between the township and the tip (K. Baird, pers. comm.).

In the past, concern has been expressed about the spread of this population and the likely effects on the recruitment of Brown Teal *(Anas aucklandica chlorotis)* (Ogle 1982). This needs to be monitored, but there remain relatively numerous and well-distributed populations of Pheasant *(Phasianus colchicus)* and Brown and California Quail *(Synoicus ypsilophorus* and *Lophortyx californica)* in the areas where wekas are found, which indicates that wekas are not having a major impact on birds they were reported to have reduced in other parts of New Zealand (Liffiton 1889).

There is also some general concern about the status of the weka throughout the North Island, especially after a recent drought reduced and split the population in the north-eastern North Island, and recovery over much of the area during the past 3 years has been poor (Beauchamp, unpubl. data). This major reduction took place rapidly, and was not recognised until it was well advanced. Surveys are required on the current status of other Northland weka populations, to enable assessment of the impact of similar natural catastrophies, especially as the reasons for the rapid disappearance of weka from the Waipu district about 1941 and around Whangarei in 1952 (McKenzie 1952, 1971, Gee 1956) are unknown. Careful monitoring may establish the factors responsible for weka fluctuations and rapid disappearances.

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REVIEW

Drawing Birds - An RSPB Guide, by John Busby (Christopher Helm). Distributed in New Zealand by Benton Ross Publishers Ltd.

Many readers of "Birds", the RSPB magazine, will already be familiar with the illustrations of John Busby. A friend and pupil of the late Eric Ennion, Busby is very much his natural successor. Born in 1928, Busby's work continues the tradition of studying by direct observation from nature with resulting vitality and spontaneity. Busby is highly critical of the pseudo-scientific approach of some illustrators, though his own approach to painting is intellectual. He has very clear views about the painting of wildlife, thinking that the subject of "truth" is often confused. He discerns two kinds of truth – one that is to do with facts that can be measured and recorded, the other revealed only through the personal interpretation of the artist's experience of reality. To submerge this latter personal truth in a saturation of objective detail is not the business of art and in fact the much sought-after authenticity is lost because the effect is so contrary to the way in which we perceive wild birds in their environment. This philosophy governs the contents of the book. He discusses such matters as simplifying the difficulties of drawing live birds – basic anatomy, flight, colour and composition. Perhaps the greatest value of the book to a New Zealand reader is that it brings together examples of the work of many leading contemporary European wildlife illustrators, together with a brief curriculum vitae; these include Lars Jonsson, Keith Brockie, Peter Partington and Mick Manning. At $62.95, it is however too expensive for all but the most serious students of both art and ornithology.

Geoff Arnold