

SHORT NOTE

Fernbird (mātātā, *Poodytes punctatus*) preying on a lizard

COLIN M. MISKELLY

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, PO Box 467, Wellington 6140, New Zealand

Fernbirds (mātātā, *Poodytes punctatus*) are abundant on the summit plateau of Mana Island, off the Wellington west coast, following a successful translocation from Taranaki in 2019 (Miskelly 2023). At 1100 h on 18 October 2023, I observed a fernbird calling from the top of a *Coprosma propinqua* bush at the south end of the summit plateau, about 80 m above sea level. The bird was about 10 m from me, and appeared to be holding a large prey item. I used 8x30 binoculars to identify the prey as a dead adult copper skink (*Oligosoma aeneum*), identifiable by its size, rich yellow belly, and the absence of a dorsolateral stripe. The tail-less skink was about twice the head + bill length of the bird, making it about 70 mm long.

Copper skinks are abundant on the summit plateau of Mana Island, where they comprised 60.5% of 1,711 skinks (of three species) caught in unbaited pitfall traps during 2018–22 (Miskelly 2023). It was very rare to catch a copper skink that had recently lost its tail (*pers. obs.*), and so it is likely that the skink being held by the fernbird had shed its tail during the predation event, indicating that it was probably alive before capture, rather than having been scavenged.

Fernbirds are almost entirely insectivorous (Barlow & Moeed 1980; Ball & Parrish 2005; Higgins *et al.* 2006). The only known previous report of a fernbird preying on a lizard was a photograph of one holding a copper skink, taken on Matakahe (Limestone Island) in Whangarei Harbour (Ball & Parrish 2005; Hare *et al.* 2016). This observation was the basis of Higgins *et al.* (2006) giving "*Cyclodina aenea*" *vide* "R. Parrish" as a food item for fernbird (Richard Parrish, *pers. comm.*).

Copper skinks are found throughout most of the North Island, and are one of New Zealand's smallest lizards (van Winkel *et al.* 2018). As with many New Zealand lizards they are much more abundant on rodent-free islands near Wellington than they are on the mainland (Townsend *et al.* 2016; Nelson *et al.* 2016; *pers. obs.*). The fact that the first two reports of fernbirds eating lizards were from small islands is likely due to the relative abundance of both fernbirds and lizards on some islands compared to the mainland. It is possible that these high densities of insectivorous birds and lizards (which are predominantly insectivorous) creates competition for a limited food resource, and pressure to exploit a wider range of prey items.

The abundance of three small skink species plus Raukawa geckos (*Woodworthia maculata*) on the summit plateau of Mana Island (Miskelly 2023) means that foraging fernbirds are likely to

encounter lizards frequently. It would be an ideal site to observe and photograph prey items delivered to nestlings, to determine how often lizards are taken by fernbirds

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