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## SHORT NOTE

### The land bird fauna of Stephens Island, New Zealand 1915 - 1933

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I have not found any records of the land birds present on Stephens Island between 1903 (Medway 2004) and 1915. Richie Smith, who is rightly credited (Crook *et al.* 1971) with the discovery of the Stephens Island frog (*Leiopelma hamiltoni*), lived on the island as a boy from December 1914 until November 1916. Smith recalled (pers. comm.) that the native land birds he saw there during that period were South Island fantail (*Rhipidura f. fuliginosa*) ("common"), New Zealand pipit (*Anthus n. novaeseelandiae*) ("quite common"), morepork (*Ninox n. novaeseelandiae*) ("common"), South Island tomtit (*Petroica m. macrocephala*) ("fairly common"), silvereye (*Zosterops l. lateralis*) ("common"), grey warbler (*Gerygone igata*) ("a few"), Australasian harrier (*Circus approximans*) ("abundant": Smith sometimes saw as many as 200-300 roosting on the top of the island at dusk), New Zealand falcon (*Falco novaeseelandiae*) ("a few"), tui (*Prosthemadera n. novaeseelandiae*) ("occasional visitor"), New Zealand kingfisher (*Halcyon sancta vagans*) ("common"), parakeet (*Cyanoramphus*) sp? ("occasional visitor"), cuckoo sp? ("occasional visitor"). Introduced land birds Smith saw were song thrush (*Turdus philomelos*) ("common"), blackbird (*Turdus merula*) ("very common"), yellowhammer (*Emberiza*

*citrinella*) ("quite common"), skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) ("quite common"), and house sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) ("common"). Smith never saw New Zealand pigeon (*Hemiphaga n. novaeseelandiae*), bellbird (*Anthornis m. melanura*), South Island robin (*Petroica a. australis*), or South Island kaka (*Nestor m. meridionalis*) during his time on the island, and he could not recall having seen a South Island rifleman (*Acanthisitta c. chloris*) there.

Principal lighthouse keeper Edward Wilson advised the Director of the Dominion Museum by letter of 23 July 1915 that the native land birds frequenting Stephens Island at that time were "cuckoo (two species)" (no doubt shining cuckoo (*Chrysococcyx l. lucidus*) and long-tailed cuckoo (*Eudynamis taitensis*)), fantail, kingfisher, "hawks (two species)" (presumably harrier and falcon), and "parakeets". The introduced land birds Wilson mentioned were goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*), "green linnet" (greenfinch (*Carduelis chloris*)), and house sparrow. He said that blackbird and song thrush were very numerous (Dominion Museum 1913-1931).

When E. Philips Turner, Inspector of Scenic Reserves, was on Stephens Island in March 1916, he was informed by the principal keeper that harrier, falcon, fantail, silvereye, pipit, and morepork (which Turner thought was possibly a chief enemy of tuatara (*Sphenodon punctatus*)), were the native land birds to be found in small quantity on the island, and that starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), house sparrow, skylark, song thrush, blackbird, goldfinch, and yellowhammer were also present. Turner mentioned that "in former times fruit-eating birds, such as the native pigeon and the tui, used to be plentiful on the island. Excepting an occasional stranger, these birds are now absent from the island, so that one of the factors favouring the spreading and regeneration of the forest now no longer exists" (Turner 1916).

Harold Hamilton of the Dominion Museum reported that tomtit, fantail, silvereye, and pipit were

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the native land birds he noted when on the island in September 1916, and that introduced birds were house sparrow, song thrush, blackbird, goldfinch, yellowhammer, "and others" (Hamilton 1916).

Neither Turner nor Hamilton mentioned that kingfishers were present on Stephens Island in 1916. However, their presence there at that general time is confirmed by various persons who had recently been, or currently were, living on the island. In April 1913, former keeper Peter Grenfell advised that kingfishers preyed upon young tuatara there; in January 1914, keeper Robert Wilson included kingfishers among the natural enemies of tuatara; in February 1914, keeper E.W. Tutt said that he had often seen kingfishers catch weta (Orthoptera) and then beat them to death on the branch of a tree before eating them; and in October 1914, assistant keeper Percy Willers reported that he had noticed kingfishers devouring very small tuatara, and that, because they were "very destructive birds", he had destroyed several kingfishers and also their eggs that were often found in decayed trees (Dominion Museum 1913-1931). As mentioned, Edward Wilson included kingfishers among birds to be found on Stephens Island in 1915, as had Richie Smith in 1914-1916. W.R.B. Oliver of the Dominion Museum noticed kingfishers in every portion of the island in January 1922. He was advised by principal keeper Frederick Woodbury that they destroyed numbers of young tuatara. Oliver recommended that the legislative protection afforded kingfishers be removed as far as Stephens Island, or any other island where there were tuatara, was concerned (Oliver 1922). Accordingly, in 1924 protection was removed temporarily from kingfishers on Stephens Island, and permission was given to the keepers there to destroy them. J. Allan Thomson, Director of the Dominion Museum, who had been on Stephens Island in June 1918, thought that the number of kingfishers there could hardly exceed 50 (Dominion Museum 1913-1931).

In 1931, principal keeper F.N. Watts reported that the "little grey owl", presumably morepork, did considerable damage to tuatara (Dominion Museum 1913-1931).

Conservationist Perrine Moncrieff spent two weeks on Stephens Island, from 14-28 January 1933 (Moncrieff 1933). Native land birds recorded by Moncrieff, with her summary of the status of each, were harrier (seen but not resident, fly to island from mainland), shining cuckoo (two or three seen), kingfisher (nesting), pipit (very common, nesting), grey warbler (only one pair seen), tomtit (one family nesting); fantail (the only fantail seen was a black one), silveryeye (quite plentiful, nesting), and tui (seen but not resident, fly to island from mainland). Introduced land birds and their status recorded by Moncrieff were greenfinch (one of

the most common birds, nesting), goldfinch (even more numerous than greenfinch), chaffinch, house sparrow (a few), hedge sparrow (*Prunella modularis*) (two or three families around houses, nesting), and starling (a small colony on western cliffs).

Moncrieff did not mention seeing yellowhammer on the island, but did find what she thought was a yellowhammer nest with three eggs, "situated about 3 feet from the ground in a mass of *Coprosma rhamnoides* surrounded by high grass. It was entirely composed of a lining of native grass held together by slender twigs". Moncrieff collected at least one of those eggs that she sent to Robert Falla, then ornithologist at the Auckland Museum. Falla, and two other staff at the museum whom he said knew English birds eggs well, confidently identified the egg as one of ciril bunting (*Emberiza circlus*). However, there must be some uncertainty about this record because, as Richard Holdaway has pointed out (pers. comm.), the literature indicates that some yellowhammer and ciril bunting eggs are indistinguishable from each other.

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