

New Zealand Bird Stories—Wekas.

BY ARTHUR P. HARPER.

Photos. taken in Auckland Museum by kind permission of Mr. Cheeseman.



It is a debated point amongst men who have spent much time in camp, and are close observers of the native birds, whether *keas* or *wekas* are the most entertaining. Personally I prefer not to give an opinion in favour of one or the other, for I have found them equally amusing, and when camping alone, as I have often done, they have proved very acceptable mates, affording interesting subjects of study, and relieving the monotony of weeks of solitude. At nearly every camp one had one or a pair of these birds who would stay near the quarters as long as one was in the locality, and give good opportunity to study their habits.

The *weka* is in every respect as curious and inquisitive as a *kea*, and in addition to this, is a most incorrigible thief. These birds will carry off everything eatable, or otherwise, which attracts their attention, so long as they can move it. They are omnivorous, and it is not exaggerating to say that they will swallow small uneatable articles as readily as scraps of food. I have often seen one of them swallow a copper pea-rifle cartridge case, and look as if he liked it.

Except in breeding time they are solitary birds, generally inhabiting one locality for months together. From the time the male and female first pair they share equally in all the family cares and worries, taking turns to sit on the eggs until hatching is complete, and then vying with one another in their efforts to feed the young offspring. While rearing their young, the parents deny themselves all kinds of food, and become very thin, carrying all savoury and unsavoury morsels to their fledglings.

It is a ludicrous sight to see two full grown birds with one young one, jostling

each other in their eagerness to force some such choice morsel as a cartridge case, or bit of tobacco, on their little chick, which sits squeaking under a fern in a plaintive manner, as much as to say: "These old fools will be the death of me."

The evident disappointment on the fond father's face is very comic when the protesting youngster refuses the tit-bit. He will pick it up when dropped, and offer it a second time, as much as to say: "So good, so good, now be a good boy and swallow it," and when the "good boy" drops it contemptuously on the ground again, the father looks round with a "did-you-ever-see-such-ingratitude" sort of look, and finally picks up the despised tit-bit and swallows it himself. If it is a piece of tobacco, he stands still and ponders, then looks side-ways first at the chick, and then at the world in general. "Humph—a funny taste that has," he seems to say, shaking his head as the tobacco burns his throat, and finally thinking, "Ah, well! I suppose I have only myself to blame," he saunters off with a meditative air, until he suddenly sees Mrs. *Weka* coming along, and *weka*-like visits his wrath on her.

When the time comes that the young ones have grown up to a fairly-supporting age, the cock bird dissolves the partnership. The mode of the dissolution depends on the locality; if it is a good place for food he promptly "raises Cain" in his domestic circle, and Mrs. *Weka* and the family have to go by the quickest route to new quarters, while he stays, probably for the rest of the year. If, on the other hand, the productiveness of the spot be poor, he simply walks away without saying adieu, in search of happier hunting grounds, and is seen no more by his wife and chicks.

Of course after the departure of pater-