

ART. XXXVI.—*On the alleged intercrossing of Ocydromus earli, and the Domestic Fowl.* By WALTER L. BULLER, C.M.G., Sc.D., President.

[Read before the Wellington Philosophical Society, 25th November, 1876.]

IN my history of the North Island Wood-hen,\* I ventured, in opposition to the advice of one or two scientific friends in England, to put on record the following statement:—

“In spite, however, of the natural wildness of this bird, and the apparent impossibility of fully taming it, in localities contiguous to its native haunts, it is sometimes seen mingling with the domestic fowls; and, however incredible such a fact may appear, there are several well-authenticated instances of its crossing with the barn-door hen and producing a veritable hybrid! I saw one of these, many years ago, at a settler’s homestead, at Waikanae; and, more recently, I carefully examined another in the possession of Dr. Hewson, at Otaki. I was informed that Dr. Hildebrand, of the Wairarapa, had a clutch of several from one hen; and several other instances might be cited. The hybrid is covered with a peculiar hairy plumage of a yellowish-brown colour, and unites with a general fowl-like appearance a disproportionately long head, Rail-like legs, and a genuine Weka’s tail.”

This statement was sharply criticized by Captain Hutton,† who ex-who expressed astonishment that I had not preserved Dr. Hewson’s specimen of the hybrid, or ascertained what it “developed into;” my answer to this being that the bird, although promised to me, was unfortunately shortly afterwards consigned to the pot, thus putting an end both to the specimen and its “development.”‡

I have never since had an opportunity of personally verifying my former observations; but Captain Mair, of Tauranga, who declares that such intercrossing is a common occurrence in that part of the island, has favoured me with the following notes:—

“In the small isolated native villages in the Rotorua district, I have observed several instances of crossing between the Weka-rail and the Barn-door Fowl, and the natives tell me that they are by no means rare.

“For some years a native chief at Wairoa has had a number of these hybrids amongst his fowls, of which he keeps a large number. In 1872–3–4, detachments of my Native Contingent were stationed at Paeroa and Niho-tekiore, and at both these places my fowls mixed with the Weka, and several small broods of hybrids were produced. I have never known this

\* “Birds of New Zealand,” pp. 165-169.

† “Ibis,” Jan., 1874.

‡ “Trans. N.Z. Institute,” Vol. VI., p. 133.

to happen in the case of large well-bred fowls, but rather with those of a very inferior type, such as are generally seen at Native villages.

“The specimens I observed most closely were some belonging to two Native chiefs at Wairoa, Aporo and Waretini. I several times had these birds in my hands, for they were quite tame. I remarked that in all cases they were female birds, smaller than the hens they had been hatched under, and presenting mixed characters, those of the Weka largely predominating. They had the head and body more elongated than in ordinary fowls; there was a total absence of comb; and the wings, which were feebly developed, had a covering of hairy feathers of a rich reddish-brown, transversely marked with black, as in the true Weka. The tail also was short, and like that of a Rail. I further remarked that these birds walked about after the manner of the Weka, in a peculiar furtive and prying way, with the head carried low. *Ocydromus earli* is very common in the district I have mentioned, particularly in the vicinity of Native cultivations on the edge of the forest. I fancy the fowls have been lost in the thickets, and, being separated from the male birds of their own kind, had consorted with the Weka, and produced a hybrid form. I may add that on one occasion, at Tauranga (in March, 1868), I observed two Wekas running with some tame fowls in a Native clearing. There could be no doubt about this, because I shot both Wekas from the door of a pataka. I have written to my nephew, Mr. Fraser, to procure me a specimen of this interesting bird, and will also put myself in communication with Aporo Whare-kaniwha, who may still possess some of them.”

To the above I may add the following note, received to-day from Mr. T. E. Young, of the Native Department:—

“I have seen two birds at Otaki, running among the common fowls at the hotel there, which I was informed were a cross between the common fowl and the Weka. The feathers appeared to be more like hair, and very thick, of a brownish-grey colour.

“Wekas are heard every night in the neighbourhood.

“I was informed a few years ago, by a settler at the Upper Hutt, that the Wekas bred with his fowls. The Wekas were then very abundant in the neighbourhood.”

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