

ART. XVIII.—*Notes on Rurima Rocks.* By Major W. G. MAIR.

[Read before the Auckland Institute, 23rd December, 1872.]

THIS group of islets, situated about four miles from the main land and five or six miles north-east from the entrance to the Awaateatua river in the Bay of Plenty, presents many interesting features, and would, I believe, well repay a careful examination. In the early part of 1871 I visited them during a fishing excursion, and as nothing, I believe, has ever been written about them, it has occurred to me to jot down, as well as my memory serves, these few notes.

Unlike most islands or rocks on the New Zealand coast this group stands on a shallow patch, and the shores, instead of being steep-to, present a margin of rock or sand extending in some parts to a breadth of 150 yards between high and low water-mark. This formation breaks the sea, and prevents that weather-beaten appearance so characteristic of sea-girt islets. The most western islet (Rurima proper) is about 100 feet in height; it covers an area of perhaps four acres, and consists of three hummocks placed in the form of a triangle, with one of its points presented to the north and another to the west. The western hummock is insulated at high water, the other two are connected by a belt of light sandy soil about seventy yards broad, and not more than ten feet above high water. On either side of this belt is a sand beach, the western one forming a landing in southerly and easterly winds, if the sea is not heavy; while that on the eastern side, protected as it is by rocks on either hand, forms a bay, with good landing in almost any weather with wind from north nearly round to south. There is hardly water enough for anything larger than ten or fifteen tons to use this bay as an anchorage in heavy weather. The first mentioned hummock is the smallest, it is precipitous and densely covered with the ordinary littoral plants. The one forming the southern corner of the angle is lower, and flat-topped, with a growth of short fern. The heat imparted to the soil by an old fumarole has made this mound a favourite breeding place for many varieties of gulls.

Under favourable conditions of the atmosphere steam may be seen issuing from the ground in several places, but it is evident that the igneous action is all but extinct.

The northern hummock is the largest and highest in the group; it is thickly wooded, and possesses some fine specimens of pohutukawa (*Metrosideros tomentosa*), in some of which I observed nests of the common pied shag (*Graculus varius*). The only fresh water in the group is on the north-west face of this hummock. It is a dripping spring not many yards above high water-mark, nearly hidden by the arching roots of a huge, half prostrate

pohutukawa ; the water is slightly brackish, and very limited in quantity. The Maoris have a tradition that if anyone were to lie down at length and drink from the pool the waters would straightway dry up. An old chief who accompanied us to point out the best fishing grounds charged each member of the party to be careful and *dip* the water. It was with much pleasure that I listened here to the sweet note of the koromako (*Anthornis melanura*). I have heard it occasionally on Whale Island, about five miles from Rurima. The Maoris think that it is the sole survivor of the race and that it flies backwards and forwards between the islands.

The other islet, Moutoki, lies about half-a-mile to the north-east. It is perhaps 150 yards in length by 50 in breadth. It is on a cone-like hummock rising from its centre that the tuatara (*Sphenodon punctatum*) is found ; the area of this cone is not more than half an acre, and yet the tuatara exists and has existed for ages in this limited preserve. Tradition says that they were plentiful on Whale Island, but does not account in a satisfactory manner for their extinction. If, as the Maoris aver, their ancestors ate all kinds of lizards, how is it that they are so frightened of them ? In a few minutes we caught four tuataras (the largest of which I forwarded to Mr. Kirk) ; they were found basking on the rocks and in holes in the loose soil. Whether these holes were the burrows of sea birds or had been scraped by the lizards I could not tell. In one instance we found a tuatara and a young penguin in the same burrow. The Maoris, as a rule, have a perfect horror of lizards, and associate them with death or disaster, but a couple of Urewera lads, who formed part of my crew, proved superior to superstitious influences, and pulled them out bravely, receiving, however, sundry sharp nips for their temerity. It is believed by some that the tuatara feeds for a portion of the year at least on the eggs of sea birds, but I could never coax one to eat an egg. From an examination of their excreta I am of opinion that their food consists of insects, more particularly a shining black beetle, about half-an-inch in length, with a longish neck, small head, and fluted clytra ; it is commonly found under stones and old wood. On the summit and sides of the cone I noticed the pohutukawa, one or two pittosporads, the common fern, some aspleniums, and a well-known grass ; about the base there is a thick growth of a dwarfed coprosma (*C. lucida* in all probability). This part of the islet swarms with a small, dark, mottled brown lizard, half-a-dozen of them under every stone or bit of drift-wood. As far as I could discover, they never mix with their larger brethren on the cone. While on this subject, I may mention the existence of a large forest lizard, called by the Maoris kaweau. In 1870 an Urewera chief killed one under the loose bark of a dead rata, in the Waimana valley ; he described it to me as being about two feet long, and as thick as a man's wrist ; colour brown, striped longitudinally with dull red.

These islets at one time abounded in hot springs ; in places the-shores consist entirely of silicious deposits, contorted in the most fantastic manner. Most of the rocks are, I think, trachytic.

Rurima is famous for its fish ; hapuka (*Oligorus gigas*), kahawai (*Arripis salar*), snapper (*Pagrus unicolor*), tarakihi (*Chilodactylus macropterus*), moki (*Latris ciliaris*), king-fish (*Seriola lalandii*), wharehou (*Neptomenus brama*), barracoota (*Thyrsites atun*), mackerel (*Scomber australasicus*), and the delicious little maomao, can be caught in immense quantities. The koura, or sea cray-fish, is unusually large, and may be found anywhere under the seaweed about low water-mark. Tokata, a rock looking something like a boat or canoe, and forming the in-shore limit of the group, is a great place for hapuka, while a rock, awash at half-tide, lying beyond all the rest to seaward, was in the olden time celebrated for the ngoiro, or conger-eel (*Conger vulgaris*); but the best fishing that I have ever met with was half-a-mile or thereabouts off the little sandy bay which I have described, by bringing the northern end of White Island just in sight to the left of Moutoki cone, and the inshore side of the western hummock of Rurima proper just clear of the inner face of the most southern hummock. In four or five fathoms water, with six lines, we had a whale-boat half full in an hour. The first fish hauled in were followed to the surface by swarms of snapper, kahawai, kingfish, barracoota and maomao, and then we simply bobbed for them as you would for minnows in a brook until my arms ached with the exertion of lifting them over the boat's side.

I have never seen a spot so well adapted for a fishing station. Were it utilised in this manner in all probability the trees would be felled, the birds would seek other nesting-places, the tuataras would be exterminated, the mysterious dripping well would dry up, and some of Rurima's most interesting features would disappear, but its fisheries would not be surpassed on the coasts of New Zealand.