

ART. XXIII.—*Notes on the Decrease of Pheasants on the West Coast of the North Island.*

By EDWARD N. LIFFITON.

[*Read before the Wellington Philosophical Society, 17th October, 1888.*]

THAT the pheasant has to a great extent disappeared from the more settled portions of the Wanganui district, where it was formerly plentiful, is an admitted fact; but the causes of that fact are a matter that may be well considered open for discussion. The primary cause is, I think, the great increase of the weka, and the predilection these birds have acquired for eggs. When the pheasants were first introduced into the district they soon increased, and in a few years large bags could be obtained. But at that time the natives lived at many small settlements interspersed, as it were, among the whites; these natives kept a large number of dogs, which were scantily fed, and which, being driven to forage for themselves, lived principally on the weka. The dogs disappeared with the Natives: and to this cause, and also to the large increase of furze hedges, may be attributed the abnormal number of wekas that may be seen any dusky evening in the country; for the furze hedges swarm with them. Now, it is well known that wekas are very fond of eggs, and during the last ten years it is the experience of many farmers' wives that they can get no eggs at all unless the fowls are kept shut up until they have laid; for all nests that were made even quite close to the homestead were and are speedily destroyed, the eggs being eaten by the weka. Wherever the natives are settled it is noticed that there are plenty of pheasants. The habit of keeping a lot of dogs and hardly feeding them at all, thus forcing the dogs to hunt for themselves, and there being generally less furze at native settlements, the wekas cannot so readily escape, and they are thus kept from unduly increasing. When the wekas first acquired a taste for eggs is a matter for conjecture. Is it in their case as with the kea's *penchant* for kidney-fat, and the Nelson parakeet's proclivity for cherries? I am rather inclined to think it is, but I have no proof. Certainly hens' eggs were not destroyed twenty years ago as they are now, for fowls were allowed to run and breed anywhere. And here it might be asked, how do the wekas discriminate between the eggs of their own tribe and those of other birds? Is it because they cover them? or do they distinguish?

Then there are other reasons: hawks attack the young and sometimes the adult pheasant; rats no doubt assist in eating the eggs; and in those districts where poisoned grain is used it goes without saying the pheasant soon disappears. And in

addition to all these causes there is the fact that the settlers' sons, who were children when the pheasant was first plentiful, are now grown up, and where one gun was carried, now two or more are added; but I think the weka the principal cause. For, at the Maori clearing on the Wanganui River pheasants are plentiful, as also on the Waitotara River; and they are also to be found, though not so numerous as at Maori settlements, in the newer bush-country opened up during the last four or five years in the Wangaehu Valley. But it may be noticed that as Maori dogs disappear and furze hedges increase the pheasant decreases, and it is very hard to suggest a remedy. The Acclimatization Society for years spent a considerable sum in buying wekas' heads, and thousands were paid for each year, but no perceptible decrease has been noticed, and at last the society have discontinued the practice.

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ART. XXIV.—*The Takahe (Notornis mantelli) in Western Otago.*

By JAMES PARK, F.G.S. (Geological Survey Department).

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UP to the present time only three specimens of this remarkable bird have been secured, and, as the opinion has been expressed by some naturalists that it is now quite extinct, I have prepared the following notes, collected during the progress of various explorations in Otago, as tending to show that it not only exists, but is probably as numerous now as when the colony was first settled by Europeans.

I may mention at the outset that the genus *Notornis* was founded by Professor Owen in the year 1848, upon portions of a skull and other parts of the skeleton of a large rail discovered at Waingongoro by the Hon. Walter Mantell, while exploring at that place for moa-bones. These fossils are all that now remain to testify the existence of the *Notornis* in the North Island, where it was known to the natives as the moho.

By a strange and, at the same time, most fitting coincidence, the first two specimens of the *Notornis*, or *takahe* as it was called in the South Island, were secured by Mr. Mantell in 1849. The first of these was captured by a party of sealers at Duck Cove, Resolution Island, in Dusky Sound; and the second by the Maoris on Secretary Island, opposite to Deas Cove, in Thompson Sound. Both of these were forwarded to England, and are now in the British Museum in London.

After a lapse of over thirty years the third specimen was