Weka / woodhen

Native birds

The weka (*Gallirallus australis*)is a large, brown, flightless bird that has a famously feisty and curious personality. These two qualities traditionally made the bird an easy food source for Māori and early European settlers. Historically, the weka was a significant resource for some iwi, and the birds' availability for sustainable harvest (mahinga kai) remains an important issue in weka conservation. Weka were also used by early European settlers, who gave it the name woodhen.

The weka's best known call is a repetitive, loud 'coo-et' that is usually heard at dusk and in the early evening. It is presented as a duet, with the male giving the lower and slower part. Weka are usually heard, not seen, although some birds, usually those living near farms or tramping huts, get a reputation for pilfering crops, food and other small objects. They will take the objects to the nearest cover to investigate them. For this reason it is best not to chase weka but to simply watch where the weka goes and retrieve the objects a little later.

Where is it found?

Currently four sub-species of weka are recognised:

- The North Island weka (*G. a. grey*), once widespread, is now only found on the mainland in the hills between Matawai and Opotiki, where a few thousand survive. Since 2000, weka have been released near Russell, in the Whirinaki Forest and there is a small population on the margins of the Hauraki Gulf near Auckland. A substantial proportion of the population is on Kawau Island. Several other offshore island populations have also been established and they are also on Mokoia Island in Lake Rotorua.

- Western weka (*G. a. australis*)are the most common sub-species and are found throughout the Marlborough Sounds, scattered in other regions of Nelson, the upper West Coast, and Fiordland in the South Island.

- Buff weka (*G. a. hector*)were once common on the eastern South Island. They have been reintroduced to Te Pekekara and Waikatipu islands. They are abundant on Chatham and Pitt islands, where they were introduced in 1905.

- Stewart Island weka (*G. a. scott*)are found at a restoration site near Halfmoon Bay on Stewart Island, and some surrounding islands.

Weka occupy a range of habitats including forests, sub alpine grassland, sand dunes, rocky shores, and even modified, semi-urban environments. The fact that some weka populations persist in highly modified habitats suggests that they can adapt to a wide range of environmental conditions.

Stewart Island weka B. Dix

Northland Conservancy
Published by
Department of Conservation
Christchurch
2006
NS0090

Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

Weka facts

- Weka mainly eat invertebrates and fruit. They occasionally eat chitons and other rocky coast invertebrates, lizards, rodents, food scraps, carrion, and the eggs and young of other ground-nesting birds.
- Weka populations are subject to large fluctuations. Populations increase during favourable conditions and decline abruptly when food becomes scarce. Moist islands and those with rich soils support the most stable populations.
- The decline and destabilisation of weka populations on mainland New Zealand, which has resulted in legal protection, has inhibited mahinga kai in modern times. Some iwi today welcome conservation projects that would potentially enable the restoration of harvesting while others believe that the time for harvest has gone. The only place where the legal harvest of weka can occur is on the Chatham Islands and on some islands around Stewart Island.
- Weka have demonstrated that under good conditions and with high food availability, they can be very productive with year-round breeding recorded at several sites. However, pairs in other stable populations breed once a year or less.
- Weka mate for life where the populations are territorial, but this is not so when the need for defence is less likely.

Did you know?

Because of its scavenging habit, the weka occupies a problematic conservation niche. Some sub-species are threatened, but moving them to offshore islands can disrupt other threatened wildlife species, especially lizards, seabirds and other ground-nesting birds. For example, weka released onto Codfish Island, where they did not occur in recent time, threatened the viability of the Cook's petrels there and were removed.

North Island weka B. Dix

Threats

The stability, density and causes of decline of weka populations are linked in complex ways to the ecosystem of each local region. The main threats for weka are:

- They are preyed upon by ferrets, cats, stoats and dogs.
- Competition with introduced species for native fruits and invertebrates.
- A change in forest and forest leaf litter composition due to the impact of introduced animals such as deer, pigs and possums.
- Habitat depletion, modification and degradation.
- Disease and parasites, although this is not well-understood.
- Climate change, which could enhance the number or length of droughts and lower food and water availability.
- Motor vehicles causing road kills.
- Snail and slug baits.
- Pest control operations where weka are exposed to poorly protected traps, anti-coagulant baits (some rat baits) or acute toxins (like cyanide). Weka can be killed by feeding on other poisoned animals (secondary poisoning). Safer toxins are now available.

How can you help?

Weka can become a nuisance if you encourage them to take or find food near houses. Weka can also become a nuisance in some gardening situations as they are attracted to newly disturbed soil. It pays to do the digging first and then plant a day or two later to prevent your plants being disturbed. In droughts, place water away from the house and open your organic compost area to the weka. If you need to control rats use weka-safe baits (Coumatetralyl, Racumin®) or protected traps. Do not use second generation anticoagulant baits (Brodifacoum, Talon®, Pestoff®, Flocoumafen, Storm®, Bromadiolone) even in houses as the rats do not die there and can be accessible to weka.

If you are concerned about weka feeding on newly sown crops or other disturbances, please report the problem to the Department of Conservation.

Further information

The Department of Conservation welcomes any comments or suggestions you may have about the conservation of weka. These can be directed to the recovery group via any office of the Department.