

envirohistory NZ

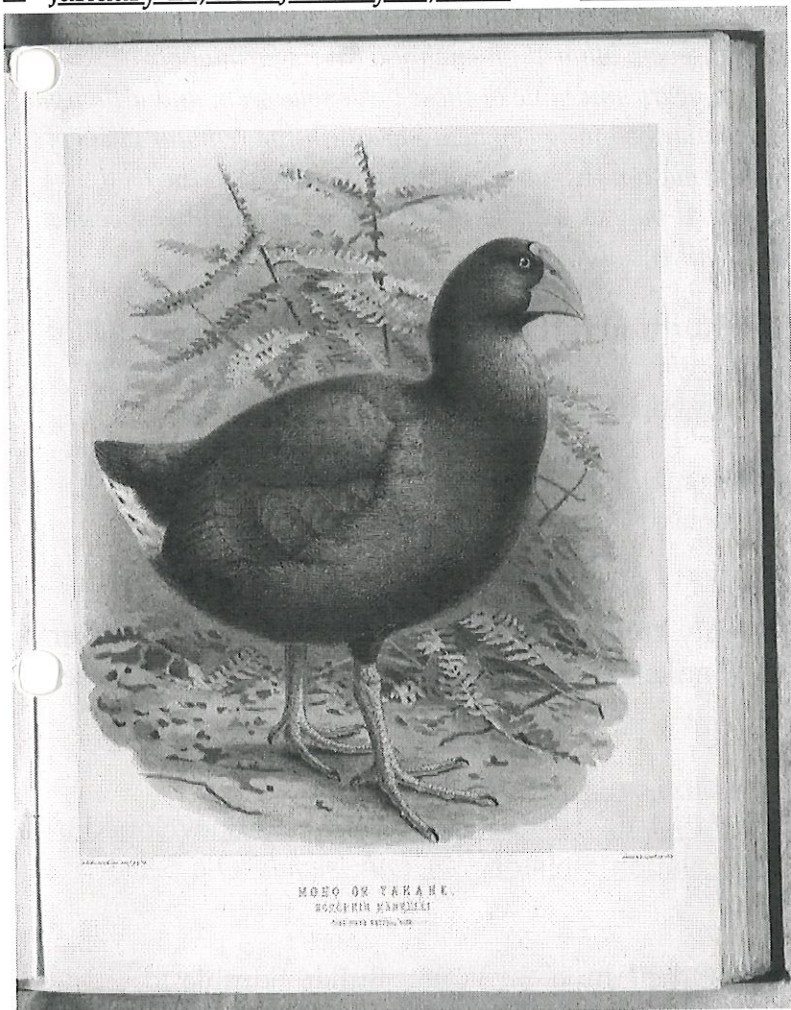
1948

Envirohistory NZ, 2010

## People and the environment through history

### Back from extinction – the Takahe

□ January 24, 2010 January 24, 2010 □ BFF editorial team



(<https://envirohistorynz.wordpress.com/2010/01/24/back-from-extinction-the-takahe/buller-1888-takahe/>) In November 1948, the takahe, which had not been sighted for 50 years and long thought extinct, was discovered in Fiordland's remote Murchison Mountains. The discovery was made not by a scientist or wildlife specialist, but by Southland medical doctor Geoffrey Orbell. A keen trapper and hunter, Orbell was convinced that the takahe was the source of strange bird calls he had heard when tramping in the area. His tracking and locating of three takahe in 1948 caused an immense stir among the public, and the government quickly closed off this remote part of Fiordland National Park in an effort to protect this last known population.



The excitement this discovery must have caused, among the public and wildlife practitioners alike, is hard to imagine. The following excerpt, from the *Southland News* in February 1897 – more than half a century before this discovery – demonstrates that even then, most people were resigned to the likelihood that the takahe would follow the same inevitable path to extinction as the huia:

*So far as is known only three specimens of this bird have ever come into the hands of white men, the first being captured in 1849, and the last in 1881. As figured in Sir Walter Buller's "Birds of New Zealand", the notornis or takahe was a handsome bird, resembling in many respects the swamp hen. Its only known haunt was the wild country in southern Westland and Otago, the first bird being caught on Resolution Island, and the second on Secretary Island in the same locality, and the third and last in a stretch of barren country called the Wilderness, on the way from Lumsden to Te Anau. We learn also from Mr Fenwick that Mr Richard Henry, the Curator of Resolution Island, is not without hopes of yet finding live specimens of the takahe, and transferring them out of harms way to his island. He feels sure that the natural habitat of the bird is in localities where the bog pine grows, and that the feeds of the three are probably part of its food...*

*...He hopes, therefore, some day, to prove, by a thorough search of some of the unexplored patches, that the takahe is not yet extinct. Against this hope has to be put the fact that ground birds of the Sounds region have greatly diminished in numbers during the last few years owing to the spread of weasels, ferrets, and cats and the takahe, although capable, one would suppose, of dealing a severe blow at an enemy with its formidable beak, would be no match for either weasel or ferret. It is sixteen years since one of these birds was seen, and although reports have gained currency from time to time of its peculiar booming cry being heard in the remoter parts of the wild country it used to inhabit, they have lacked confirmation. It may yet exist in some out of the way untrodden valley, but we fear the chances are against this. It may be mentioned that none of the three specimens captured is to be seen in this colony. Two are in the British Museum, and the other in the Dresden.*

The flightless takahe was once widespread in both North and South Islands. But, with the arrival of mammal predators, all but the Fiordland population was wiped out. The Murchison and nearby Stuart mountains are the only sites where takahe now thrive without human intervention.

Without the efforts of this determined enthusiast, we may have only later discovered this last surviving population of takahe – possibly too late to save them from the damaging effects of predators.

[**Figure above:** For many decades, the takahe was only known by this illustration in Sir Walter Buller's 1888 tome, "A history of birds of New Zealand" – thanks to the efforts of Orbell and others, we are now lucky to be able to see the bird in the flesh.]

[Sources: [Papers Past](http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast?a=d&cl=search&d=THD18970227.2.31&srpos=2&e=-----10--1----0takahe-all) (<http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast?a=d&cl=search&d=THD18970227.2.31&srpos=2&e=-----10--1----0takahe-all>), [Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand](http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/conservation-a-history/7) (<http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/conservation-a-history/7>), *Our Islands, Our Selves* (2004), by David Young]

□ [commentary](#) □ [Dresden](#), [Fiordland](#), [Geoffrey Orbell](#), [huia](#), [Sir Walter Buller](#), [Southland](#), [takahe](#)

## One thought on “Back from extinction – the Takahe”

### 1. [JULIE FUTTER](#)

November 23, 2015 / 9:47 am

Kia ora,

I'm Julie the Takahē Advocacy Ranger for DOC's Takahē Recovery Team. I just wanted to let you know we have just launched the Official Takahē Recovery website ( <http://www.takaherecovery.org.nz> ) and was hoping you might share the link on your website on your takahē page.

Many thanks,

Julie

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