

# **TIRITIRI MATANGI**

*(island life as it used to be)*



New Zealand is a freak of nature. One of the most varied and unique nations on earth, our illustrious natural heritage is mostly due to our isolation from other, larger continental landmasses. With immense oceans between us and them, it's kept our flora and fauna largely protected from baddies, creating a distinctive ecosystem – like the fact that we have no native land mammals.

PHOTOS BY MIKE COONEY



by Mike Cooney

Actually, that's not entirely true. We have a couple of bat species – like my favourite *Chalinolobus tuberculata*. But they could've flown here, so don't really count ... Anyhow, all this created an incredible bird and insect population – and with no mammalian predators, New Zealand birdlife was like nothing else on earth.

The biggest birdie was the 3.6m-tall, 230kg, Giant Moa, one of nine species of this endemic flightless bird found on

our shores. Then you had the massive Haast eagle – which preyed mainly on the aforementioned moa. The beautiful huia – largest of the New Zealand wattlebirds (including the kokako and saddleback). Plus another 242 or so different bird species running, flying, hopping, waddling and swimming their way around the Land of the Long White Cloud.

So humans would've encountered quite a sight – and sound! – when they first stepped upon these shores some 800 odd years ago.

But, unfortunately, that's when things started turning to custard ...

With the arrival of Maori and, later, the first European settlers, birds started dropping like flies. A whole bunch of our feathered friends were good eating. They were also flightless, fat and slow (too much of the good life) – so were easy pickings for hunters. Add the fact that another bunch were real pretty, and things weren't looking too good for them either. Then came the introduced predatory mammals – like the rat, stoat and cat, who were licking their lips before they even left the ship! And combine all that with massive deforestation, the outlook was grim.

In fact, for more than 50% of New Zealand's birds, it was game over! Extinction! No more moa ... so long Haast eagle ... RIP beautiful huia.

Okay, maybe I'm sounding a little morbid and dramatic. But I've recently had an epiphany. You see, I used to like birds (the feathered kind) – but I'd never really thought too much about endangered this, or extinct that, or the fact that New Zealand species are amongst the most threatened in the world.

However, that all changed a few weeks ago, when I visited Tiritiri Matangi Island ...

**N**ot being much of an ornithologist or conservation expert, I didn't have a clue what or where Tiritiri Matangi was, but some suggested it was worth a look! So, after a quick Google search plus a couple of emails and phone calls, I found myself on a 360° Discovery Cruise ferry with two of my kids, heading for a small, 220 hectare island just 4km off the coast of Whangaparaoa Peninsula.

Tiritiri Matangi is an open island sanctuary (allowing public access) developed in partnership between DOC and the Supporters of Tiritiri Matangi Inc – a non-profit conservation volunteer group whose members are a major reason this project is so successful. These sanctuaries are set up to help ensure the survival of many rare and threatened species – and

being an island makes keeping it predator free a lot easier.

Since 1984 over 280,000 trees have been planted by thousands of volunteers, providing a unique habitat for a whole bunch of endangered (some critically) birds and reptiles. Birds such as the saddle-back, kokako, and once-thought-to-be-extinct takahe, have been subsequently released – alongside the prehistoric lizard, tuatara. And, by all accounts, it's been an outstanding success, with hundreds of visitors arriving each week to sample life as it used to be ...

Arriving at the island, we were ushered off the ferry (all 150+ of us!) and given a briefing by the local DOC ranger. Then those who'd booked a \$5 guided tour, were grouped with various volunteers and escorted around part of the island – a fantastic intro into what was on offer.

The island is incredibly well set up,





**Kokako**

with well-manicured tracks running throughout. We spent much of our guided walk on the 'Wattle Track' – reportedly one of the best tracks to see Tiritiri's native birds. And it didn't disappoint. As we slid quietly beneath the bush canopy, our guide pointed out different bird species, including two I'd never seen before: the saddleback and stitchbird. The kids were into it – oohing and aahing over each new discovery. And the birds were incredibly noisy, a real cacophony of sound – although nothing (according to our guide) compared to the dawn chorus ...

**M**ost people make a day-trip to the island, but we were fortunate enough to be staying the night in the volunteer's quarters. Which meant that, once the other tourists had left, we had the island (or so it seemed) to our-

selves. So after a quick bite to eat and a good look around the Visitors Centre, we headed to Northeast Bay (at the northern tip of the island), where, camera and binoculars in hand, we went exploring. The landscape seemed to be ever changing – under the bush canopy one moment, then in wind-swept coastal scrub the next. And the birdlife was like nothing I'd ever seen before.

The kids were off, no motivation needed – hunting, spying, creeping their way around the island, trying to get the perfect camera-shot. We found the melodic kokako ... bellbirds ... saddlebacks ... kakariki ... and a North Island robin, amongst others. But our top discovery was a couple of takahe and their chick! Here was one of New Zealand's most endangered birds – thought to be extinct until a small group



Rifleman



Kakariki



Morepork

was found in a remote valley in Fiordland – right in front of us! Not behind bars, or in a cage, but living life in the wild as they were meant to.

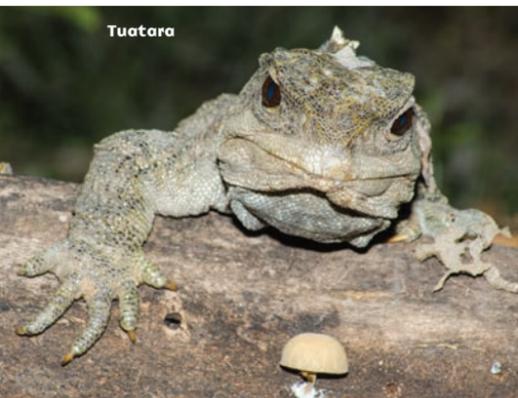
The kids had never taken so many photos!

An afternoon swim in the beautiful

bay – with tui and saddlebacks flittering around the pohutukawa trees that lined the shore – capped off the day perfectly. In fact, there were so many birds that our conversations ended up sounding like this: “Oh, it’s just another tui ...” (Talk about taking things for granted!)

That evening, after dark, we went out with Jill (the volunteer who helped organise our trip) looking for kiwi and tuatara. Unfortunately it was blowing a gale (Tiritiri Matangi means ‘tossed by the wind’ – how appropriate!) so the kiwi weren’t out and about as they usually are. However, much to the delight of my kids (and me, just quietly!) we did find a tuatara hiding under some coastal scrub. These living fossils can reach more than 100 years of age – and scientists suggest that, in captivity, even 200 years is possible!

PHOTOS: © SIMON FORBHAM / NATUREPIX



Tuatara



Robin

The following day, while we waited for the next ferry to arrive, we explored the Kawerau Track – which took us through some mature forest past an ancient, gnarly old pohutukawa, estimated to be between 800-1000 years old! (I bet that tree could tell some stories ...)

This was a beautiful part of the island, with a large board-walked section making travel easy. It was another bird-fest, and this time we got up-close-and-personal with a couple of kereru (wood pigeon), a tiny rifleman (New Zealand's smallest bird), and a curious robin that got all excited when we rustled through some fallen leaves. But today's prize was an encounter with the rare stitchbird (aka hihi) – the small honeyeater once only found on Little Barrier Island.

We spent our final few hours up near the still-working lighthouse, taking

loads more photos of a couple of resident takahe. A mandatory stop at the gift shop for some take-home mementos was our last act on this island paradise before the ferry arrived, dropping off another day's worth of visitors.

My kids and I had had a ball on Tiritiri Matangi – a fantastic opportunity to see a slice of New Zealand as it used to look (minus the moa). Yes, we've lost a lot of our recent history – some of it forever. But we three slightly tired but proud-to-be-Kiwis returned home on that rocking ferry totally convinced that what we have left is worth preserving.

No, let me rephrase that ... worth restoring!



---

CHECK OUT [WWW.TIRITIRIMATANGI.ORG.NZ](http://WWW.TIRITIRIMATANGI.ORG.NZ) FOR INFORMATION ABOUT THE WILDLIFE, ISLAND VISITS, LATEST NEWS AND HOW TO BECOME A SUPPORTER.

---