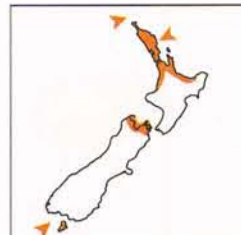


Most are secretive birds of wetlands and are rarely seen except when attracted by taped calls. Plumage is usually a pattern of black, white, brown and chestnut. Immatures are duller. Sexes alike. Body is narrow, for slipping through dense vegetation. Long unwebbed toes spread their weight. The short tail flicks as they walk. Bill stout and dagger-like in rails, shorter in crakes. Fly reluctantly when disturbed but are capable of sustained flight, mainly at night.

**BANDED RAIL (Moho-pereru) *Rallus philippensis*** **Locally common native**

30 cm, 170 g. Strikingly marked but secretive. *Upperparts olive brown and black with white spots, and underparts barred black and white.* A chestnut band crosses chest, and a narrower one passes through eye to hindneck; whitish eye stripe, grey chin and throat. Long stout bill, brown. Juvenile less distinctly marked. Can fly well but, when flushed, flies for a short distance with legs dangling. Call a creaky 'swit', heard mostly at dusk and dawn. **Habitat:** Saltmarshes, mangroves and, less often, freshwater swamps; also some offshore islands. **Breeding:** Sep–Mar. [Sp 156]



**RAILS, GALLINULES and COOTS** *Rallidae*

About 140 species, of which 8 breed in New Zealand. Midden evidence shows that 8 other endemic species became extinct between the arrival of Maori, and European settlement, and the Chatham Island Rail *Rallus modestus* became extinct in about 1900. Two other species are vagrants to New Zealand, and a Corncrake *Crex crex* was reputedly killed near Nelson in 1865, but this record has not been officially accepted.

The rails are mainly aquatic birds, all capable of swimming well. In New Zealand, they range in size from the small Marsh Crake to the large flightless Takahe. Apart from the Pukeko and Weka, rails and crakes are secretive birds, usually skulking in freshwater swamps, and estuarine mangroves and reedbeds. On some mammal-free islands, however, they live on the forest floor. Rails have slim bodies that help them move through dense vegetation, moderately long powerful legs with long unwebbed toes that help them walk in wetlands, a short tail, which is flicked up and down as they walk or swim, and short broad wings. Apart from the flightless Weka and Takahe, rails have low, laboured flight by day, but at night they fly

higher and show good ability to colonise isolated islands. Island forms tend to become flightless.

The two species of gallinule breeding in New Zealand, the Takahe and the Pukeko, are believed to represent two invasions from Australia of the cosmopolitan Purple Swamp-hen *Porphyrio porphyrio*; the Takahe arrived several million years ago, and the Pukeko much more recently. Typical of ancient New Zealand birds, the Takahe has become larger and flightless.

The gallinules and coots have a bony frontal shield extending from the bill to cover the forehead. The legs of coots are quite short, and the toes have lobes of skin that help them swim.

Most species nest solitarily, but Pukeko form groups and several females can lay in the same nest. The cup-shaped nest is generally well concealed in dense swamp vegetation or among *Carex* clumps; however, coots construct an exposed floating platform attached to raupo or rushes. The downy young are capable of walking, running and swimming within days of hatching.

**Reading:** Ripley, S.D. 1977. *Rails of the World*. Toronto: M.F. Feheley.

**156. BANDED RAIL *Rallus philippensis*** **Plate 36**

**Other names:** Moho-pereru, Buff-banded Rail  
**Size:** 30 cm, 170 g  
**Geographical variation:** Up to 15 subspecies are recognised. The subspecies *assimilis* is the form breeding on the New Zealand mainland, and *dieffenbachii* was endemic to the Chathams but only one specimen was collected in 1840

before it was exterminated in the mid-1800s. **Distribution:** Breed in the South Pacific from Indonesia and the Philippines through Melanesia, Australia and New Zealand to as far east as Niue in western Polynesia. In New Zealand, Banded Rails were formerly common throughout the main islands but had

declined by the 1930s owing to habitat loss and the introduction of mammalian predators.

They are now found mainly in mangrove forests, saltmarshes and rush-covered (not raupo-covered) freshwater wetlands in Northland (including the Three Kings, Poor Knights and Great Barrier Islands), around Auckland, the Waikato, Coromandel Peninsula and Bay of Plenty. They are rarely recorded south of a line from northern Taranaki to Opotiki, except for breeding reported from Mahia. Some are probably overlooked in inland swamps such as those around Lake Wairarapa, where, after 60 years without sightings, one was killed by a cat in 1992. In the South Island, they are now largely confined to unmodified saltmarshes of the northern coast in Whanganui Inlet, Golden Bay, Tasman Bay and at the head of the Pelorus and Queen Charlotte Sounds in the Marlborough Sounds. Banded Rails are occasionally recorded from Stewart Island and are still in moderate numbers on some of the Weka-free islands off the coast and on Little Solander Island.

**Population:** Locally common near the coast of the northern North Island. The northern South Island population was c. 100 breeding pairs in the early 1980s.

**Conservation:** Protected native, decreasing through habitat modification with reclamation of estuaries and mangrove swamps, and disturbance and predation by introduced mammals, especially mustelids.

**Breeding:** Pairs remain on their territories all year. Most eggs are laid in September–

December, but clutches have been recorded as late as March, and dependent chicks have been seen in April. They probably lay several clutches each season, comprising 3–5–6 buff or pale pinkish eggs (40 x 29 mm, 16 g), marked with dark reddish-brown and purplish-grey spots and blotches. The cup-shaped nest is well hidden in thick grass or rushes. The pair incubates for 19–25 days. The chicks, which are initially covered in black down but change to dark brown by a week old, are led from the nest within 24 hours and are accompanied by both parents throughout the c. 60 days to fledging.

**Behaviour:** Pairs remain together on territory year after year but often only emerge into the open at dawn and dusk or in heavy rain. Sometimes a family party emerges to forage in a secluded creek or ditch, especially on a falling tide, when there are young chicks to be fed. The best way to see Banded Rails is to play tapes of their calls, especially their high-pitched 'quee-quee-' or creaky 'swit-swit-' calls often heard at dusk.

**Feeding:** Diet is mainly snails (*Potamopyrgus estuarinus*, *Ophicardelus costellaris* and *Amphibola crenata*), crabs, spiders, beetles and worms. They also take seeds, fruits and succulent leaves. Most feeding is in the morning and evening and straight after high tide when crabs are most active and the tide has dislodged snails.

**Reading:** Elliott, G.P. 1987. *NZ J Ecol* 10: 109–115. Elliott, G.P. 1989. *Notornis* 36: 117–123. Schodde, R. & de Naurois, R. 1982. *Notornis* 29: 131–141.