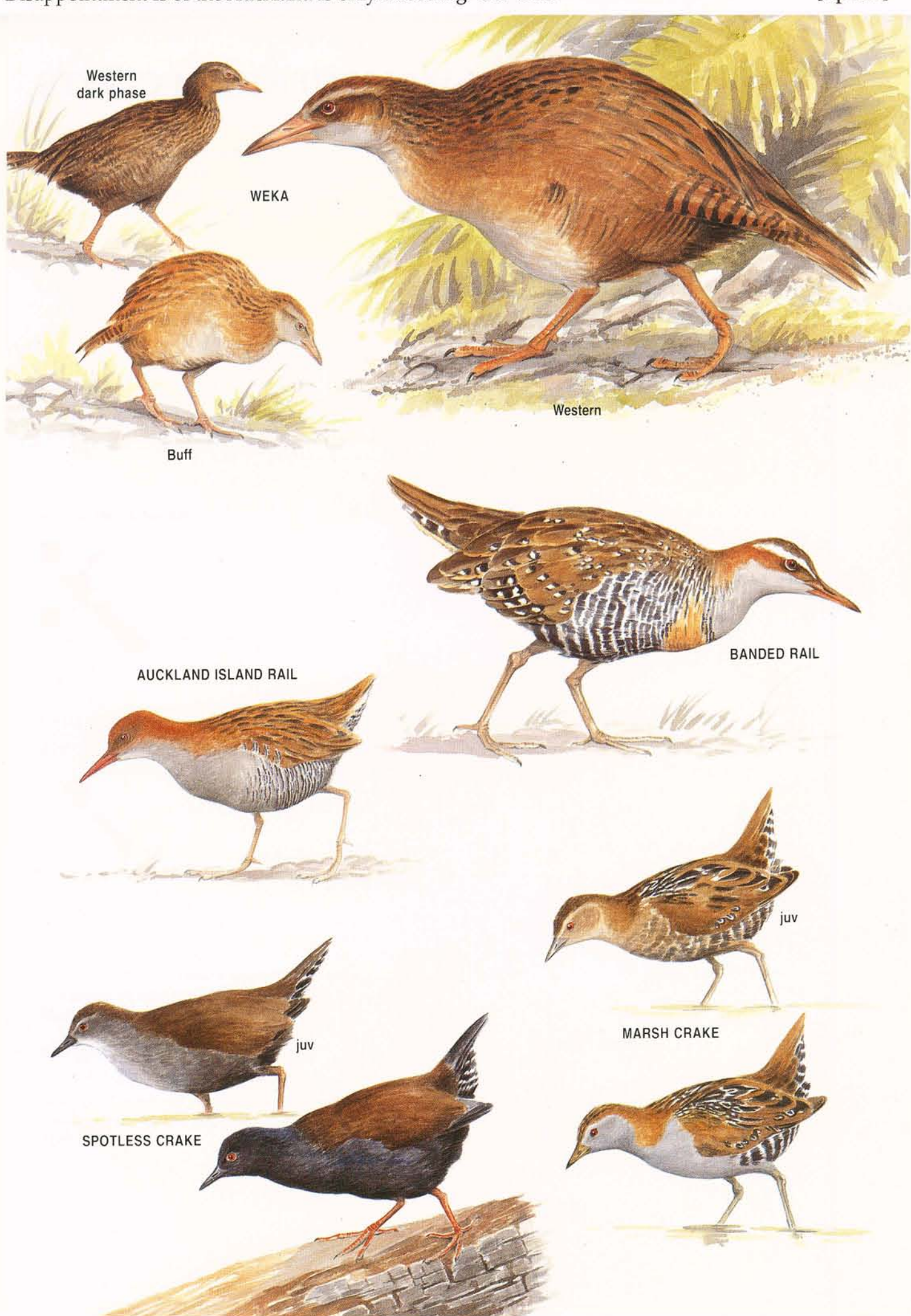


Most are secretive birds of wetlands and are rarely seen except when attracted by taped calls. Plumage is usually a pattern of black, white, brown and chestnut. Immatures are duller. Sexes alike. Body is narrow, for slipping through dense vegetation. Long unwebbed toes spread their weight. The short 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.

AUCKLAND ISLAND RAIL *Rallus pectoralis*

Locally common native

21 cm, 90 g. Secretive subspecies of Lewin's Rail of Australia and New Guinea. Smaller and darker than Banded Rail. Back, wings and uppertail olive brown streaked black. Crown, sides of head and neck rufous to gingery brown. Throat and bill grey. Flanks and undertail finely barred black and white. Long slim bill, reddish. Legs pale brown. **Habitat:** Dense scrub cover, tussock and herbfields on Adams and Disappointment Is of the Auckland Is only. **Breeding:** Oct-Dec. [Sp 157]



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.

157. AUCKLAND ISLAND RAIL *Rallus pectoralis*

Plate 36

Other name: Lewin's Rail (Australia)
Size: 21 cm, 90 g

Geographical variation: The Auckland Island Rail (*muelleri*) is a subspecies of the Lewin's Rail, a variable species split into about ten subspecies ranging from the Philippines, through eastern Indonesia, New Guinea and Australia to the Auckland Islands.

Distribution: Known only on Adams and Disappointment Islands in the Auckland Islands. On Adams Island, they are wide-

spread in habitats with a dense canopy about a metre above ground but with open runways beneath. They are found throughout the tussock and herbfields on Disappointment Island.

Population: Locally common on Adams Island, with an estimated population of c. 1500 birds. Common on Disappointment Island, with several hundred birds.

Conservation: Protected threatened native. Auckland Island Rails were first collected in

the late 1800s but were not seen again until one was caught on Adams Island in 1966 and taken to Mt Bruce Wildlife Reserve. In 1989, they were found to be moderately common on Adams Island, once their habitat preferences were known. Another healthy population was discovered on Disappointment Island in 1993. With two populations, the subspecies is probably safe as long as rats are not accidentally introduced to these islands.

Breeding: Little is known. Two nests were found in November 1989, and at the same time young chicks were heard squeaking. Eggs are therefore laid in October-November. The only clutch recorded was of 2 cream eggs (35.1 x 26.5 mm, 12 g; 32.8 x 24.2 mm, 8.5 g), marked with brown, red-brown and pale grey spots and blotches concentrated at the blunt end. The cup-shaped nests were well hidden among tussock and sedge. Incubation and

fledging periods are unknown. An immature bird caught in the wild lived 9 years in captivity at Mt Bruce.

Behaviour: Little known, as birds are shy and cryptic, and live under dense vegetation. In summer, they are active from just before sunrise to just after sunset, and although they do not call at night, they may remain active. The usual distinctive call is a loud, descending 'crek', repeated about 10 times at one-second intervals. The second call is a loud, sharp, whistle-like note, repeated about 50 times in about 12 seconds. They also make a variety of grunts and clicks, and chicks squeak. They respond to their taped calls.

Feeding: Unknown, but presumably the diet is invertebrates such as snails, worms and insects.

Reading: Elliott, G.P. et al. 1991. *Notornis* 38: 199-209. Falla, R.A. 1967. *Notornis* 14: 107-113.