

NOTORNIS MANTELLI, Owen.

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Notornis Mantelli, Owen in Trans. of Zool. Soc., vol. iii. p. 377.—Mantell in Proc. of Zool. Soc., 1850.—Gould in Ib., 1850.

THE acquisition of a new species is always a matter of great interest; but when, as in the present instance, it is of one so nearly extinct as to be only known to us previously by its fossil or semi-fossilized remains, the interest becomes enhanced in the highest degree; it is well known that the existence of the celebrated Dodo is all but traditional, a fate which, but for Mr. Walter Mantell's fortunate acquisition of a living example, would probably have been shared by the present bird, the characters of which were first made known to us by Professor Owen from the semi-fossilized remains previously obtained and sent home by the same talented explorer after whom it is named.

That few living examples remain, is evident from the fact that the mounted specimen in Dr. Mantell's possession is the only one that has yet been seen; all the information respecting it that has been obtained is comprised in the following interesting account communicated by him to the Zoological Society of London, and published in their "Proceedings" for 1850:—

"This bird was taken by some sealers who were pursuing their avocations in Dusky Bay. Perceiving the trail of a large and unknown bird on the snow with which the ground was then covered, they followed the foot-prints till they obtained a sight of the *Notornis*, which their dogs instantly pursued, and after a long chase caught alive in the gully of a sound behind Resolution Island. It ran with great speed, and upon being captured uttered loud screams, and fought and struggled violently; it was kept alive three or four days on board the schooner and then killed, and the body roasted and ate by the crew, each partaking of the dainty, which was declared to be delicious. My son fortunately secured the skin.

"Mr. Walter Mantell states, that, according to the native traditions, a large Rail was contemporary with the Moa, and formed a principal article of food among their ancestors. It was known to the North Islanders by the name of '*Moho*,' and to the South Islanders by that of '*Takahé*'; but the bird was considered by both natives and Europeans to have been long since exterminated by the wild cats and dogs, not an individual having been seen or heard of since the arrival of the English colonists. That intelligent observer, the Rev. Richard Taylor, who has so long resided in the islands, had never heard of a bird of this kind having been seen. In his 'Leaf from the Natural History of New Zealand,' under the head of '*Moho*,' is the following note: 'RAIL, colour black, said to be a wingless bird as large as a fowl, with red beak and legs; it is nearly exterminated by the cat: its cry was 'keo, keo.' The inaccuracy and vagueness of this description prove it to be from native report and not from actual observation. To the natives of the paks or villages on the homeward route, and at Wellington, the bird was a perfect novelty and excited much interest. I may add, that upon comparing the head of the bird with the fossil cranium and mandibles, and the figures and descriptions in the 'Zoological Transactions,' my son was at once convinced of their identity; and so delighted was he by the discovery of a living example of one of the supposed extinct contemporaries of the Moa, that he immediately wrote to me, and mentioned that the skull and beaks were alike in the recent and fossil specimens, and that the abbreviated and feeble development of the wings, both in their bones and plumage, were in perfect accordance with the indications afforded by the fossil humerus and sternum found by him at Waingongoro, and now in the British Museum, as pointed out by Professor Owen in the memoir above referred to.

"In concluding this brief narrative of the discovery of a living example of a genus of birds once contemporary with the colossal Moa, and hitherto only known by its fossil remains, I beg to remark, that this highly interesting fact tends to confirm the conclusions expressed in my communications to the Geological Society, namely, that the *Dinornis*, *Palapteryx*, and related forms, were coeval with some of the existing species of birds peculiar to New Zealand, and that their final extinction took place at no very distant period, and long after the advent of the aboriginal Maoris."

Upon a cursory view of this bird it might be mistaken for a gigantic kind of *Porphyrio*, but on an examination of its structure it will be found to be generically distinct. It is allied to *Porphyrio* in the form of its bill and in its general colouring, and to *Tribonyx* in the structure of its feet, while in the feebleness of its wings and the structure of its tail it differs from both.

From personal observation of the habits of *Tribonyx* and *Porphyrio*, I may venture to affirm that the habits and economy of the present bird more closely resemble those of the former than those of the latter; that it is doubtless of a recluse and extremely shy disposition; that being deprived, by the feeble