

Buff weka *Gallirallus australis hectori* 53 cm

NEW ZEALAND ENDEMIC, INTRODUCED TO CHATHAMS



Weka are hen-sized, flightless rails, with buff-brown plumage and sturdy bills and feet. They are endemic to mainland New Zealand. The buff weka, a subspecies formerly found in the eastern South Island, was introduced to Chatham Island in 1905: 12 birds were released at Kaingaroa by Walter Hood. They disappeared from their natural range by the 1930s but are abundant on Chatham Island, from where they were introduced to Pitt Island in the 1970s. Historically, weka provided an important food source to both Maori and Pakeha in many parts of New Zealand. Weka are fully protected elsewhere in New Zealand,



Adult buff weka, Chatham Island. Photo: Peter Reese.

but can be legally harvested in the Chatham Islands where weka-hunting is a popular activity.

Weka occupy a wide variety of habitats including coastal areas, rough pasture, forests and wetlands. Their diet consists mostly of invertebrates and fruit, but they also feed on rodents, the eggs and young of ground-nesting birds, and carrion. Weka

are generally territorial and can breed all year round if food is abundant, laying up to six eggs per clutch.

The decline of weka in their historic range has been linked to a variety of factors including climate, food supply, disease, changes in habitat and the introduction of mammalian predators, particularly ferrets and stoats. On the Chatham Islands, large numbers of weka are harvested each year for food, while others are killed by dogs and, at some sites, as part of protection programmes for the endangered taiko and Chatham Island oystercatcher. While there is no information regarding the impact of this take on the population, weka appear to be flourishing on both Chatham and Pitt Islands and may number over 50,000 birds.

There have been several attempts to transfer buff weka back to their natural range in the South Island. A reintroduction to Arthurs Pass in 1962 was not successful, but a transfer in 2002 to Te Peka Karara, an island in Lake Wanaka, is showing promising results.