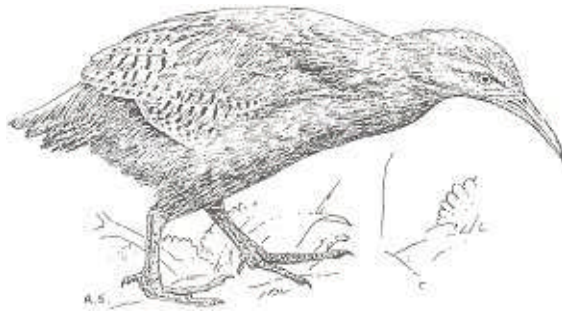


The Woodhen

of Lord Howe Island



The Woodhen, as the only surviving member Paradise lost of the genus *Tricholimnas*, was one of the special features of Lord Howe Island when it was nominated for World Heritage Listing in 1982. The environment of the Island is the only home for the Woodhen which is an endangered species.

The Woodhen *Tricholimnas sylvestris*, is a brown, flightless bird, about the size of a bantam. Although it has strong legs and feet it mainly uses the bill to probe for food, which consists mainly of worms and insects in the leaf litter and rotting logs. Females are slightly smaller than males and chicks are covered with sooty black down.

What makes the Woodhen so special

Not too long ago, in the 1970s, the Woodhen was considered one of the rarest birds on earth. There were less than 30 left, and it was feared they may face extinction. On this remote tiny island, 500 kilometres from the nearest land, they survived only on the limited areas of the mountain summits. The only other member of the genus was another flightless rail on New Caledonia, last seen in the 1930's.

Paradise lost

The ancestors of the Woodhen came to Lord Howe Island many thousands of years ago. They could fly easily, but on an island with no predators and plenty of food they slowly lost this ability. They thrived in the subtropical rainforest of the Island. But the year 1788 changed all that. H.M S Supply anchored off the Island and members of her crew came ashore in search of food and water. The Woodhens, and the now-extinct Whitethroated Pigeon and White Gallinule provided easy game for the sailors. The birds had never been hunted and were not afraid of humans. A few months after the "Supply" left the Island, three transports stopped over and Surgeon Arthur Bowes of the Lady Penryhn gave an apt description of the Woodhen,

"... a curious brown bird abt. the size of the Land Reel in England walking totally fearless and unconcern'd in all part around us, so that we had nothing more to do than to standstill a minute or two and knock down as many as we pleas'd wt. a short stick if you throw'd at them and miss'd them or even hit them without killing them, they never make the least attempt to fly away and indeed wd. only run a few yards from you and be as quiet and unconcern'd as if nothing had happen'd. "

THE WOODHEN

The Woodhens were an easy and tasty source of food on Lord Howe Island. Their demise was rapid: in 1837 the Woodhens were described as large and plentiful and forming the main food of the Islands increasing population; in 1853 J.D.Mcdonald, from the exploration ship HMS "Herald", couldn't find any. In addition, feral cats, and pigs found the Woodhen

easy prey and added to the decline in numbers. The Woodhens managed to survive on the mountain summits where pigs could not reach them.

Years of Research

In 1966, the IUCN, an international conservation body, classed the Woodhens as endangered. They were later put on the IUCN's highest priority list. In 1969 John Disney of the Australian Museum assisted by Dr. Peter Fullagar of CSIRO found that there were less than 30 Woodhens on Mt. Gower and two or three pairs on Mt. Lidgbird. Further years of study of Woodhen on Mt. Gower found that adult Woodhens pair for life and each pair defends a territory of about 3 hectares.

Although most of the Woodhens mate during late spring-early summer, only two or three pairs successfully produced young any year. The juvenile birds were expelled from their parents' territory, and they could survive only when an adult bird died and left an area vacant. Following these studies, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) with funding from the National Parks and Wildlife Foundation, began a detailed study of the Woodhen, with a view to saving the birds from extinction. The project began in May 1978 when Dr. Ben Miller of NPWS came to the Island to study the reasons for the Woodhen decline and a possible plan for saving it. See also Scientific Interest

A bird in the hand

After two years research by Dr. Miller a plan was devised to save the Woodhen. It was determined that feral pigs and cats were a major factor in low Woodhen numbers. Rangers removed feral cats, and the Islanders were employed to shoot the pigs.

The next phase was to build a captive breeding centre in an area of natural forest at Stevens Reserve. The centre was completed in May 1980 and a New Zealand bird breeder Glen Fraser was employed to rear the Woodhens with the eventual aim of releasing them into the wild.

Three healthy pairs of Woodhens were brought down from Mt. Gower and were laying eggs within a few weeks after arriving at their new home. The eggs were initially cared for by the parent birds and then placed in an incubator for the last week before hatching. The chicks were hand fed before being put in separate enclosures from the adults. By the end of the breeding season in late 1980, 15 healthy chicks had been hatched.

The call of the wild

The last stage of the project began in May 1981 when two pairs of the captive-bred birds were released on Little Slope, below the cliffs of Mt. Gower. In August 1981 the birds were found to be healthy and confirmed that captive-reared Woodhens could survive in the wild.



By January 1984, 93 Woodhens had been released and the breeding centre was closed. Today, Woodhens can be seen in many parts of the Island. They are breeding well, especially in the lowland forest around the settlement.

Woodhen numbers are being carefully monitored to ensure the population maintains a healthy level, and also to further understand the population dynamics. Twice a year, in November and March, a survey team visits and counts the Woodhen in different areas and band as many new chicks as they can. There are estimated to be about 220 Woodhen on the Island, although many more have known to have hatched. Woodhen are territorial, with adult males aggressively defending their territory, even from their own offspring. The optimum number for the Island may be around 220.