

## SHORT NOTE

### Sightings of snipe in Northland, New Zealand, by 18<sup>th</sup> century French mariners

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The North Island snipe (*Coenocorypha barrierensis*) is one of 8 mainly allopatric taxa of a genus once present throughout New Zealand. Of these 3 are extinct and 5 extant (including 3 sub-species) (Gill *et al.* 2010; Miskelly & Baker 2010). Once widespread, as evidenced by sub-fossil bone deposits, the North Island snipe (along with the South Island snipe *C. iredalei*) is believed to have become extinct on the mainland, apparently due to predation by Pacific rat / kiore (*Rattus exulans*) and dogs / kurī (*Canis familiaris*) early in the prehistoric period (i.e. before European contact) (Worthy *et al.* 2002; Worthy & Holdaway 2002; Tennyson & Martinson 2006; Heather & Robertson 2015).

Human settlement of New Zealand occurred circa 1280 A.D. (Wilmshurst *et al.* 2008), therefore some 1000 years later than the arrival time of the

kiore originally proposed by Worthy & Holdaway (2002); the junction between the prehistoric and historic periods in New Zealand is usually timed for the arrival of James Cook in late 1769. In December 1769, in a historical coincidence, as Cook's *Endeavour* was making its way westward around the top of the North Island, the French explorer Jean-Marie François de Surville in the *St Jean Baptiste* taking the opposite course (the two ships passing within hours) called at Doubtless Bay (named thus by Cook a few days before) and stayed for 15 days. Unlike Cook's scientific voyages, Surville's expedition was a commercial venture and included no scientists. Surville and his officers were merchant mariners but being men of the Enlightenment, in addition to hydrographic surveying and charting, they recorded observations of the native people and described the minerals, plants and animals they saw as best as they could.

Of Surville's officers, the 2nd lieutenant Jean Pottier de L'Horme appeared to be the most inter-

ested in natural history. He had written, while attempting to describe the *prodigieuse* birdlife of the Solomon Islands, in October 1769:

*I sincerely regret that I am neither a botanist nor a naturalist to describe in an intelligible way what I thought I should report of the fruits, trees, and animals I have seen, but I hope that...someone...will always be grateful to me for reporting things as well as I can, even if I do not report them as [well] as they ought to be' (Pottier de L'Horme 2004).*

Of Pottier de L'Horme's descriptions of the New Zealand birds he recorded at Doubtless Bay, 3 at least are readily identifiable: New Zealand quail (*Coturnix novaezelandiae*) (which became extinct in the 19<sup>th</sup> century), the North Island saddleback (*Philesturnus rufusater*), (locally extinct in the 19<sup>th</sup> century), and the tui (*Prothemadera novaeseelandiae*).

Pottier (as he had at the Solomon Islands) also recorded 'snipe' ('bécassine'): *'As for the water fowl, we found enormous numbers of wild duck, curlews, sea larks, snipe, and another kind of bird [variable oyster-catcher (*Haematopus unicolor*)] with black plumage, red feet, and a red beak shaped like that of a woodcock [bécasse] and of the same length, but flattened in the opposite way of those of geese and ducks.'* Pottier's comments were echoed by the ship's supercargo Pierre Antoine Monneron: *'In fact there is a prodigious number of water birds to be seen there – wild duck, curlew, sea-larks and snipe'* (Ollivier & Hingley 1987).

While it is interesting that Doubtless Bay is one of the sites where sub-fossil North Island snipe bones have been found (Worthy *et al.* 2002), and though Pottier's list was headed '*oiseaux aquatiques*', the context of Pottier's and Monneron's references would suggest they were referring to snipe-like sea or shore birds. As the 2-week visit of *St Jean Baptiste* at Doubtless Bay was in December, large flocks of migratory waders, such as the bar-tailed godwit (*Limosa lapponica*), would have been present in the area. Godwits were also sometimes referred to colloquially in English as 'snipes' by 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century New Zealanders (Miskelly 1988; Miskelly 2000; Miskelly & Norton 2006).

Twenty-eight months after the visits of Cook and Surville, the French explorer Marc-Joseph Marion Dufresne, commander of a two-ship expedition called at the Bay of Islands on 3 May 1772. The two ships stayed for 72 days. Julien Crozet, Marion's second-in-command in his flagship *Mascarin* later wrote about this visit in his popular book *Nouveau voyage à la Mer du sud*.... Like Surville's officers he made references to 'snipe' but again it is apparent he was referring to wading birds, actually using the term 'bécassines de mer', literally 'sea snipes' (Crozet 1783).

However, there are other reports of 'snipe' from the Marion expedition, that are somewhat less easy to explain as sightings of coastal waders.

The commander of Marion's consort vessel was a 20-year-old noble, Ambroise Bernard Le Jar du Clesmeur. Not unusually for a member of the ancien régime aristocracy, one of his favoured pastimes ashore was game shooting. At his first opportunity in New Zealand, on 26 April at Spirits Bay, du Clesmeur reported he shot quail '*just as good as those we know in Europe*' (Ollivier 1985).

At the Bay of Islands Marion ordered du Clesmeur to set up a masting camp on the western side of what is now called Clendon Cove as a base for the hauling out of two kauri logs to replace masts damaged in the Southern Ocean. This necessitated him working in the bush and living ashore for several weeks. Of this camp du Clesmeur wrote: *'Our little camp was pleasantly enough situated. A mountain crowned with evergreen trees sheltered us from winds coming from the sea and the southern side was a broad plain, marshy it is true, but abounding in game such as quail, snipe and duck.'* (Ollivier 1985).

Later in a section of his journal headed: '*Description de la Nouvelle Zélande & de ses habitants*', in a subsection headed '*de la chasse*' (Of Hunting) he wrote:.... *All the game that we know of in New Zealand are winged and consist of wild duck, snipe, quail, wood pigeons, blue fowl [pukeko], and several other birds. There are also parrots of all colours to be seen and sea birds in abundance* (Ollivier 1985).

Du Clesmeur's 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant, Le Dez, also referred to 'snipe' ('bécassine') in a section headed 'Game' ('Gibier') in his journal *'There is a lot of game, either on land or at sea, a lot of wild ducks, cormorants, loons [?] etc., snipe, quail like ours only bigger, blue fowl, very beautiful parrots of different sorts, very big wood pigeons...'* (Ollivier 1985).

Du Clesmeur references to 'snipe' are noteworthy in that he made them in the first instance in the connotation of a 'broad plain' ('*une vaste plaine*') which was 'marshy' ('*marécageuse*') and in association with quail and duck, and in the second with wild duck, quail, wood pigeons and blue fowl, birds which he described collectively as 'game'.

The first presumption must be that these references to 'snipe' were also of godwits and/or other sandpipers/scolopacids. There is also the possibility that they were sightings of the Arctic vagrant Japanese snipe (*Gallinago hardwickii*). Broad, marshy plains are preferred habitat for these visitors. However, sightings of Japanese snipe are today rare and are usually of single birds; given the French visit was from May to July, Japanese snipe were unlikely to have been present in sufficient numbers to be considered as 'game'.

It would seem the gamebird du Clesmeur identified as 'bécassine' resembled the *bécassine des marais* [literally swamp snipe], i.e. European common snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*); a gamebird he likely would have been familiar with (just as he was with

quail) from 'shoots' on his family's country estate on the remote Crozon Peninsula of Brittany, a well-known wintering site for this species.

Therefore, an outside possibility is that du Clesmeur saw the North Island snipe. However, as snipes are believed to have become extinct soon after human settlement, and as du Clesmeur provided no further detail or physical description, this can only be speculation.

The timeline for extinction of snipe on the mainland was questioned by Medway (2007). He noted that in April 1773 (less than a year after the Marion Dufresne visit) during Cook's second *Resolution* voyage, at Dusky Sound, Cook's naturalists Johann Rheinhold Forster and his son Georg collected a number of birds, one of which Forster senior recorded as *Scolopax gallinago*, an older name for the European common snipe. Medway (2007) proposed that this was likely to have been a South Island snipe.

Another unresolved difficulty for the accepted timeline of early prehistoric extinction of snipe on the mainland is the reported sighting by Captain Richard Cruise (Oliver 1955). In August 1820, Cruise reported shooting a snipe on Motukorea (Browns Island) in the inner Hauraki Gulf. Cruise was able to examine the specimen closely: '*The only one any of us had seen in this country; in its plumage it resembled those found in England but the bird itself was much smaller*' (Cruise 1823). The North Island snipe (unlike the Japanese snipe, which is larger) was indeed much smaller than the European snipe that Cruise, (like du Clesmeur a 'sportsman') appeared to be familiar with. If Cruise's assessment was correct, given their flying capability, (Miskelly 1987; Tennyson & Martinson 2006; Miskelly & Fraser 2006; Miskelly *et al.* 2012), there was likely movement of snipe between Motukorea and the nearby mainland, 1 km away, (now part of the suburbs of the city of Auckland).

In 1870, 2 North Island snipe were recorded on Hauturu-a-Toi / Little Barrier Island by Captain Bennett of the schooner *Mary Ann*. '*One was captured alive but died in captivity, the other escaped*' (Oliver 1955). Bennett's specimen verified what otherwise today would have almost certainly been considered a questionable sighting. This specimen (the holotype of the species) is kept at the Auckland War Memorial Museum (Gill 1984).

It is believed that North Island snipe persisted on Little Barrier into the historic period (unlike those on the mainland) because kiore must have been a relatively recent arrival there (Miskelly 1988; Tennyson & Martinson 2006). Exactly when kiore arrived on Little Barrier has not been determined, but perhaps could be done so by the radio carbon dating methods used by Wilmshurst *et al.* (2008). If so, such information could throw light on the dy-

namics and time scale of kiore predatory impacts on snipe on the mainland, and perhaps help resolve these early, first contact reports of snipe by European voyagers.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to Dr Brian Gill, Auckland War Memorial Museum for commenting on the manuscript, to Adrien Lambrechts of Biotope Bretagne, Brest, for his assistance, and to reviewer Dr Colin Miskelly of the National Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa for his helpful advice and recommended improvements.

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**Keywords** North Island snipe; *Coenocorypha barrierensis*; North Island saddleback; *Philesturnus rufusater*; New Zealand quail; *Coturnix novaezelandiae*; Ambroise Bernard Marie Le Jar du Clesmeur; Richard A. Cruise; Motukorea