

## SHORT NOTE

### South Island robin (*Petroica australis*) stung to death by wasps (*Vespula* sp.)

L. BATTERSBY  
Dolphin Watch Marlborough  
P.O. Box 197, Picton

Motuara Island (41°S 174°E) is a predator-free island in the outer reaches of Queen Charlotte Sound. It is now being used as a site for the enhancement of several rare and endangered species of bird. The island is covered with regenerating forest that is about 80 years old and supports dense populations of bellbirds (*Anthornis melanura*) and South Island robins (*Petroica australis*) as well as smaller populations of fantails (*Rhipidura fuliginosa*), pigeons (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*), and South Island saddleback (*Philesturnus carunculatus*).

As a tour operator with a Department of Conservation (DoC) concession to visit the island, I had reported the presence and location of 2 wasp (*Vespula* sp.) nests to the local DoC office. Elsewhere, wasps are controlled by DoC as they damage insect populations and are a danger to visitors. As no DoC staff were intending to visit the island for several days, I volunteered to deal with the wasps as soon as possible. On 28 April 2000, my schedule included dropping a party of tourists in the outer Queen Charlotte Sound, returning to collect them several hours later: the early start provided an opportunity to remove the wasp nests on Motuara Island.

After reaching the island at 0700 h, I successfully dealt with 1 nest and then made my way to the 2nd, about 200 m away. By then (0800-0830 h) the morning

was warm and the wasps were becoming active. The 2nd nest was under an old stump and appeared to have 2 large entrance holes. These I blocked with clods of earth dug from near the nest. As I began to treat the nest chamber, many wasps swarmed out of a hole that I had not seen on the other side of the stump, so I retreated about 10 m and stood quietly, waiting for the wasps to quieten. Meanwhile, a South Island robin flew down to forage where I had been digging about 2 m from the nest. One wasp immediately flew to the robin, settled on its back, and stung the bird just above the tail. The robin reacted vigorously and flipped about on the ground. Within a few seconds, 8-10 more wasps attacked the bird and started to sting it, followed by many more as the robin thrashed around on the ground. I left the vicinity hastily because the wasps were now very aggressive. As I went, I noticed that the robin had flown to a branch about 1 m above the ground, with wasps still swarming around it. When I returned 7 h later to finish removing the nest, the robin was dead on the ground about 4 m from where I had last seen it on the branch.

There is little doubt that the wasp attack was triggered by my disturbing the wasp nest. Whether the wasps would have attacked the bird near the nest without additional disturbance is unknown, but my observations show that wasps can kill apparently healthy robins.

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