

SHORT NOTE

A swimming North Island weka (*Gallirallus australis greyi*) in the Hauraki Gulf

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Weka (*Gallirallus australis*) are flightless birds endemic to New Zealand. Their presence on many offshore islands is often attributed to introductions by humans, both by Maori and later by European settlers. Here we report an observation of a weka swimming ~1300 m, suggesting the colonisation of some inshore islands by this species may have been unassisted.

On 3 Dec 2011 at ~10:00 h, a swimming bird was observed ~300 m off the south coast of Pakatoa I in the Hauraki Gulf by Don Riddell and David Thomsen. It was identified as a North Island weka (*G. a. greyi*). The bird reached a rocky shore east of the island's south-westernmost headland 15-20 minutes after 1st sighted. It rested for 10-15 minutes, shivering strongly, before slowly walking up the beach and disappearing into the coastal vegetation. Weka are common on Pakatoa I (Don Riddell, *pers. obs.*).

The weka was 1st sighted coming from the direction of Rotoroa I, where the species is also

present (A. Bishop, *pers. comm.*). The minimum distance between the islands is ~900 m. However, the tide at the time was close to low, with a current running from the south-west. Given the landing location and current direction, it is likely the weka left from near the western end of Cable Bay on Rotoroa I. This would require a swim of ~1300 m. The wind direction (74 degrees) and speed (4.8 m/s) at the nearby Musick Point at that time generated a significant chop (NIWA).

Weka on Pakatoa I are descended from 29 captive-reared birds released on 3 Aug 1996 (Beauchamp *et al.* 1999). There is no information on the origin of the weka on Rotoroa I, but it is likely they are descended from individuals which made the crossing in the opposite direction, from Pakatoa I, although an undocumented introduction is also possible. Our observation suggests birds are quite capable of swimming between the 2 islands and thus are not isolated.

Weka are known to swim distances of a kilometre or more (Heather & Robertson 2005), although most observations are of other subspecies, and on bodies of water which are more sheltered than the Hauraki

Gulf. Western weka (*G. a. australis*) are often seen in the water in Doubtful Sound, especially around the Shelter I (N. Robertson, *pers. comm.*). For example, on 21 Dec 2011 the *Fiordland Navigator* moored ~500 m offshore in Pendulo Reach, Doubtful Sound, and was visited by a weka which climbed 2 flights of stairs from the stern landing platform and spent the night wandering around the main saloon before being discovered at around 6 am (C. Haraway, *pers. comm.*). Western weka also regularly appear on islands in the Marlborough Sounds where they do not have permanent populations. Sixty-five weka have been captured on Maud I (850 m from the mainland) and returned to the mainland since 1987, although some of these were offspring of birds which had nested on the island. Weka have also arrived on Motuara, Long and Titi Is, which are all ~2 km from the mainland. They too are typically removed to protect wildlife on which the weka may prey (B. Cash, *pers. comm.*).

Buff weka (*G. a. hectori*) also have been reported swimming. One bird of this subspecies released on Pigeon I in Lake Wakatipu was found at Mid Caples Hut, 9 km from the lake edge, after a presumed swim of ~2.5 km to the shore at Greenstone Station (E. Kennedy, *pers. comm.*). Buff weka have also made swims of up to 1.3 km between the islands on Lake Wanaka (B. McKinlay, *pers. comm.*).

Together, these observations confirm the ability of weka to cross water bodies up to 2 km or more and thus potentially colonise a number of offshore islands naturally. The ability of weka to swim between islands and/or the mainland also indicates that populations of this species may not be genetically isolated and may need to be managed at a larger scale.

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