

EXTINCT BIRDS OF THE WORLD

#31 RED RAIL



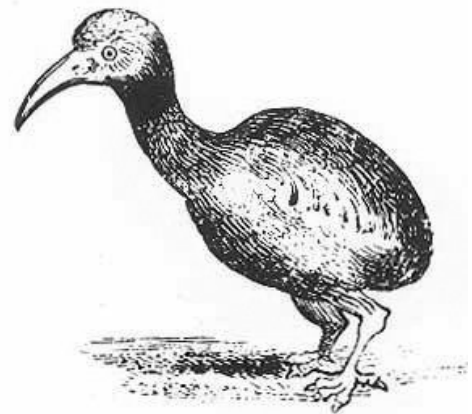
Illustration: F. W. Frohawk—1907
From *Extinct Birds*
By Lionel Walter Rothschild,
2nd Baron Rothschild

The Red Rail or Red Hen of Mauritius, *Aphanapteryx bonasia*, was an extinct flightless rail, somewhat larger than a chicken. It was endemic to the island of Mauritius, and is only known from a large number of bones, some descriptions and a handful of drawings and paintings. Its plumage was reddish brown all over, the feathers were fluffy and hairlike; the tail was not visible in the living bird and the short wings also nearly disappeared in the plumage. It had a long, slightly curved, brown bill and comparatively (for a rail) long legs. In fact, it resembled a

lean kiwi more than a rail.

The Red Rail is mentioned in almost every report about Mauritius from 1602 on. However, the details provided are repetitive and do not shed much light on the bird's life history, many dwelling on various hunting methods, and the fact that, when roasted, it was considered a good substitute for pork. Most of the information on the appearance of the bird comes from a painting by Joris Hoefnagel, done from a bird living in the menagerie of Emperor Rudolph II of Austria about 1600. Surprisingly, a bird resembling a Red Rail is figured in Francesco Bassano the Younger's painting *Arca di Noè* ("Noah's Ark"). As Bassano died before the Dutch colony was established on Mauritius in 1598, the origin of the bird is a mystery. Finally, there are some rather crude depictions of the Red Rail in three of the 1620s Dodo paintings by Roelant Savery. Therefore, it can be deduced that around 1600, or possibly even earlier, a small number of Red Rails reached Europe alive. There are also four more or less crude drawings done on Mauritius.

The Red Rail was hunted to extinction in the century after its discovery. The Dodo was considered rather unpalatable, and was usually only killed out of curiosity or boredom, but the Red Rail was a popular game bird for both the Dutch and French settlers. While it could usually out run a pursuer when chased, being territorial it was easily caught by showing it a red cloth, which was promptly



A depiction by Pieter van den Broecke
from the year 1617

attacked. They could then be easily secured, and their cries, when held, would draw more to the scene, as the birds, which had evolved in the absence of predators, were curious and not afraid of humans.

As it nested on the ground, introduced pigs which ate their eggs and young probably played a large part in its extinction. When François Leguat who had become extremely familiar with the Rodrigues Rail, *Aphanapteryx leguati*, in the preceding years, came to Mauritius in 1693, he remarked that the Red Rail was already rare. As he was the last source to mention live specimens, they are assumed to have become extinct around 1700.

Determination of the Red Rail's status and disappearance is complicated because the local name for the Dodo, *Todaersen* (or *dodaersen*, "fat-arses") was transferred to the Red Rail (which was just as plump-rumped) when the Dodo also became extinct. Therefore, it is difficult to ascertain which species is meant in some contemporary accounts.

R.V.C. With help from Wikipedia

Series concludes

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BIRD KEEPING IN AUSTRALIA