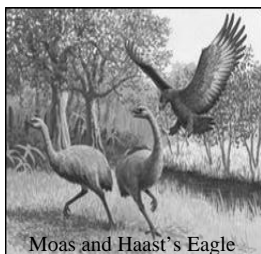


EXTINCTION

Extinction is, as they say, forever. Over the years new species have evolved and older species have naturally declined and disappeared, but over the last few centuries mankind has increasingly added to the rapid decline and extinction of an ever increasing number of bird species. Habitat destruction, fashion and just plain ignorance have all added to the toll. It is my intention in this series to showcase some of the known species that have disappeared and will unfortunately never grace us with their presence again.

EXTINCT BIRDS OF THE WORLD

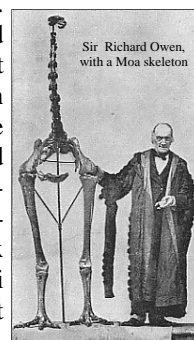
#1 THE MOA



Moas and Haast's Eagle

The Moa were giant ratites (flightless birds) native to New Zealand. They were unique in having no wings, not even small remnant wings, like other ratites. Fifteen species of varying sizes are known, the two largest species of the giant Moa (*Dinornis robustus* and *Dinornis novaezealandiae*), reaching about 3.6 m (12 ft) in height and about 250 kg (550 lb) in weight. They were New Zealand's dominant herbivores of the forest ecosystem. With fruit, leaves and twigs being a large part of their diet.

The Moa are thought to have become extinct about 1500AD, although some reports suggest that a few stragglers of *Megalapteryx didinus* may have survived in remote areas of New Zealand until the 18th and maybe even 19th centuries. The Moa were hunted by Haast's Eagle (*Harpagornis moorei*), the world's largest eagle, now also extinct. The extinction of the Moa species is generally attributed to hunting and forest clearance by the Maori. A trader who lived on the East Coast of the North Island from 1834 to 1837, reported that he had been shown "several large fossil ossifications" found near Mount Hikurangi. He was certain that these were the bones of a species of emu or ostrich, he also reported that the Maori had a tradition that in times long past very large birds had existed, but the scarcity of animal food, as well as the easy method of capturing them, caused them to disappear. The trader further noted that he had received reports of a "species of *Struthio*" still existing in remote parts of the South Island. Another early settler also referred to a fossil from the Mount Hikurangi area, and surmised that it belonged to an extinct bird, called Moa (or Movie) by the local Maori. In 1839, a Poverty Bay flax trader who had a strong interest in natural history, was given a piece of unusual bone by a Maori who had found it in a river bank. He showed the 15cm fragment to a Sydney surgeon, who sent it to Richard Owen at the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons in London.



Owen puzzled over the fragment for four years, eventually establishing it was part of the femur of a large animal, but what? It was uncharacteristically light and Honey-combed. Finally, Owen announced to a sceptical scientific community and the world that it was from a giant extinct ostrich-like bird and named it *Dinornis*. He was ridiculed in some quarters, but was proved correct when enough Moa bones to reconstruct full skeletons were subsequently found.

The Kiwis (*Apteryx species*) were once considered to be the closest relatives of the Moa, but comparisons of their respective DNA suggest they are more likely related to the Emu (*Dromaius novaehollandiae*) and Cassowaries (*Casuarius species*) of Australia

Although numerous species were described in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many were based on partial skeletons and were subsequently found to be of species previously described. Recent research, based on DNA recovered from museum specimens, suggests there were only 11-15 species, including the 2-4 Giant Moa. The Giant Moa seem to have had a pronounced difference in the sexes, the females being much larger than males; so much bigger in fact that they were often originally classified as separate species. The Giant Moa grew to 3.9m; and due to the pressure of Maori hunting is thought to have become extinct about 1300AD.

Although skeletons of the various Moa have traditionally been reconstructed in an upright stance to highlight their impressive height, it is more likely they carried their heads forward, in a similar manner to the Kiwi, so they could graze on low-level vegetation.

Although the Moa are almost certainly extinct, there is occasional speculation that some may still exist in the rugged wilderness of New Zealand's South Island. Amateur zoologists, and others, continue to search for them, but so far no hard evidence or actual specimens have been sighted.

In January of 1993, Paddy Freaney, Sam Waby and Rochelle Rafferty claimed to have seen a large moa-like bird on the West Coast. But analysis of the blurry photograph, of what they claimed was a Moa, suggests the subject could be either a large bird or a Red Deer (*Cervus elaphus*). The photo is considered by most to be a hoax; and may have been faked in an attempt to attract tourists.

Experts say the likelihood of any Moa remaining alive, but unnoticed, is very unlikely, since such gigantic birds, in a region often visited by hunters and hikers, would almost certainly have been sighted long before now. Some Moa enthusiasts cite the rediscovery of the Takahe (*Porphyrio hochstetteri*), fifty years after being thought extinct, as evidence Moa could still exist. However, while the Takahe, a bird the size of a domestic hen, could easily avoid humans, large birds like the Moa would have considerably more difficulty in remaining hidden. The Takahe was rediscovered after its tracks were identified, but of Moa tracks there have (so far) been none.

References: *Wikipedia.....the free internet encyclopaedia*

