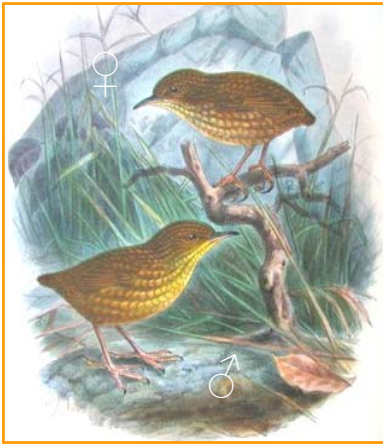


EXTINCT BIRDS OF THE WORLD

#6 THE STEPHENS ISLAND WREN

Xenicus lyalli



STEPHENS ISLAND WREN

Illustration from
Birds of New Zealand
Supplement, 1905
by W.L. Buller

The Stephens Island Wren is famous for being widely, but wrongly, considered the only known species to be entirely wiped out by a single living being. This bird was a flightless, nocturnal native of Stephens Island, New Zealand, which fed on insects.

According to popular belief, the entire population was killed by the lighthouse keeper's cat named "Tibbles" in 1894, but this is not what actually happened. The scientific name commemorates the assistant lighthouse keeper, David Lyall, who brought the bird to the attention of science. Originally, it was described as a distinct genus, *Traversia*, in honour of naturalist and curio dealer Henry H. Travers who procured many specimens

from Lyall, but usually it is considered to be part of the *Xenicus* "wrens", which are not wrens at all, but a similar-looking New Zealand lineage of primitive passerines [perching birds], better referred to as *acanthisittids*.

Archaeological work has revealed that the species was widespread on the main islands of New Zealand in earlier times. Its disappearance there was probably due to predation by the Polynesian Rat, *Rattus exulans*, which was introduced by the Maori, or maybe arrived by accident even earlier. How this flightless bird crossed the 3.2km of ocean to Stephens Island is not clear, although the presence of Hamilton's Frog, *Leiopelma hamiltoni*, which is killed by exposure to salt water, suggests that rafts of vegetable matter would have crossed the sea. It is, therefore, a matter of sheer luck that the Stephens Island Wren was found alive by scientists (at least for a few months), because anything that could bring the wrens to the island could have just as easily allowed the Polynesian Rat to cross as well.

It is the best known of the few (five or less) flightless passerines known to science^(Millener, 1989), all of which were inhabitants of islands and are now extinct. The others were two or three relatives of the Stephens Island Wren and the Long-legged Bunting from Tenerife, subfossil remains of which were only discovered recently and which became extinct in prehistoric times.



POLYNESIAN RAT

From an article entitled
"On the New Zealand Rat
(With Illustrations.)"

Much of what is widely assumed to be fact about this species' extinction is incorrect, commencing with an account by Rothschild in 1905 who claimed that the cat "Tibbles" had killed all the birds. The research of Galbreath & Brown (2004) and Medway (2004) has uncovered much of the actual history of the bird during the short time it was known to researchers.

In April 1892 clearance of land for the lighthouse and the associated farm begins. (The first report of the species was in notes on the island's birdlife made by one of the construction workers, F. W. Ingram, which mentions "two kinds of wren", the second was probably the Rifleman, *Acanthisitta chloris*.)

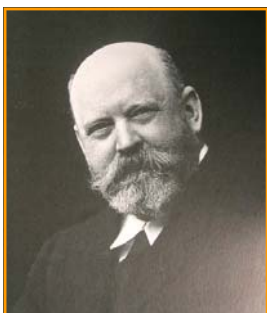


RIFLEMAN
Lithograph from
Birds of New Zealand,
2nd edition.
By W.L. Buller, 1888

February 1894 is a likely date for the introduction of cats to Stephens Island. All that can be said with any certainty is that at some time in early 1894, a pregnant cat taken to the island escaped.

About the middle of the year a cat - probably one of the young animals taken in as a pet; starts to bring in carcasses of a species of small bird to the lighthouse keepers. Lyall, who was interested in natural history, has one sent to Walter Buller by A. W. Bethune, second engineer on the government ship *Hinemoa*.

When the specimen reaches Buller, he at once recognises it as a distinct species and prepares a scientific description, to be published in the journal *Ibis*. Buller then sends the specimen to London for the renowned artist John Gerrard Keulemans to make a lithograph plate to accompany the article. In the Winter, or early Spring, (Southern Hemisphere): Lyall finds several more specimens. He tells Buller about two more (but does not send them to him), and sells nine to Travers. Travers, who recognises the commercial value of the birds, sidelines Buller and offers the birds to



Lionel Walter Rothschild
2nd Baron Rothschild
Ornithologist & Zoologist
1868—1937

Walter Rothschild, who was wealthier and thus more likely to pay a high price, further arousing Rothschild's interest by writing, "in a short time there will be [no "wrens"] left". Rothschild acquires the nine specimens. In early 1895 Travers offered Rothschild a specimen preserved in alcohol (with viscera intact) for £5.0.0 (\$10.00 about \$900.00 in today's money) Rothschild apparently agrees, but does not receive the bird. Between the 4th and 9th of February (1895) Travers and three assistants searched the island for the bird, but none are found.

Meanwhile Lyall wrote to Buller: "...the cats have become wild and are making sad havoc among all the birds."

In March of the same year Travers supplied Rothschild with some details of the bird's habits. Stating that to his knowledge, the species had only been seen alive twice until then; and that he had only been able to procure one more specimen, brought in by the cat as the bird was dying, which had also been preserved in alcohol.

On March the 9th a Christchurch newspaper, "*The Press*", states in an editorial:

"there is very good reason to believe that the bird is no longer to be found on the island, and, as it is not known to exist anywhere else, it has apparently become quite extinct. This is probably a record performance in the way of extermination."

In conclusion it is probable that the species was exterminated by feral cats during the winter of 1895. Habitat destruction, is sometimes given as an additional reason for the birds' disappearance. However, this was apparently not significant, as in 1898, the island was described as heavily forested, and there was little interference with habitat beyond the lighthouse and its associated buildings. Large-scale destruction of habitat only started in late 1903, by which time the Stephens Island Wren was certainly extinct.

Cats were finally eradicated on Stephens Island between 1916 and 1925.

Reference: *Wikipedia*