

Tin Bird



Meanwhile, native species—strange animals and plants that evolved in isolation since the days of the dinosaurs—have been hit hard. Gone are the Haast’s eagle and flightless wrens. But the kiwi remains, and that’s a credit to New Zealanders who have worked hard for decades to retain the rare

“New Zealanders have worked hard to retain the rare plants and animals that do still live on the island.”

Odd Bird: Five species of kiwi remain, all flightless and largely nocturnal.

plants and animals that do still live on the island. The country now is considered a world leader when it comes to keeping out new invasive species and eradicating others already on shore. And because of that vigilance, native habitat still hangs on in spots throughout the country.

Spots like Stewart Island, where I’ve gone to find my bird. In the company of a few pilgrims and a guide, I set off silently down a beach at sunset. The dim light turns every ball of kelp, every scrap of driftwood into a sighting.

Finally, our guide raises his hand to signal a halt. His flashlight flickers over what looks like a basketball, bouncing softly on the sand. We stop and stare, and after a moment the outline of a kiwi emerges. It pecks and bobs its way myopically until it’s almost upon us. At our feet it dithers, its whiskered face looking up at us, puzzled at this new development. Finally, something startles the dusky ball, and it scurries off into the underbrush. Only then do we exhale.

About a hundred years ago, a young man visited New Zealand. So struck was he by the abundance of kiwis that he named his new business venture, a shoe polish in a tin, after the then-ubiquitous bird.

Today, kiwis are endangered. But the remaining birds have become a treasured national symbol.

New Zealanders are devoted to protecting these rare species because they inspire us and enrich our world. But that devotion isn’t driven by nostalgia. They are protecting what they have *now*—from bucolic hillsides to remnant rare species. They are protecting what remains and what remains precious.



Sanjayan

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I first encountered the kiwi as a 5-year-old while trailing my dad as he went about his morning ritual. There it was, the silhouette of a little bird, stamped on the tin of his black shoe polish. The image vaguely resembled a squat chicken except for the curiously long beak. I imagined the creature had something to do with the making of shoe polish. Whatever it was, I was fascinated by it.

Decades later, with a speaking obligation as an excuse, I finally have arrived in New Zealand—flying almost 8,000 miles to see this flightless bird.

Like me, New Zealanders are enthralled by nature. They have protected about a third of their land area. The scenery is spectacular, as anyone who has seen the *Lord of the Rings* films knows. The fiords and forests are as good a rendition of Tolkien’s fantastical Middle Earth as any on the planet.

But not all is perfect here. Some of the country’s most striking and unusual creatures—including the kiwi—have lost nearly all their habitat.

Though New Zealand’s landscape is breathtaking, it turns out that large swaths of the country have been remade in the image of bucolic Europe. The grasses that blanket the hills were, like the sheep that graze them, introduced from Europe. Magnificent forests turn out to be Monterey pines native to California. The country is filled with imports.