

Legendary creatures of New Zealand

New Zealand is a young country, but it does have its fair share of legends, ghosts and myths. And some of the most persistent mysteries are the continued sightings of odd creatures in the mountains, streams, and harbors.

New Zealand was the home to the moa. A huge variety of these massive flightless birds lived here, and even after it went extinct there are continuing stories about sightings of it in the wilds. The countryside is after all full of dense ferns and thick bush, and it is places such as this that breed legends of mysterious animals. Scotland may have its Loch Ness monster, but New Zealand has an even wider collection of oddities.

The only native mammals in New Zealand are bats, and yet rumors persist of various types of creatures with four legs and fur prowling the waterways and bush. The land may have many unique and wonderful birds, but there is a distinct lack of mammals. Captain James Cook in 1773 visited in his ship the *Resolution*, and reported seeing a creature the size of a cat, although his own naturalists admittedly suggested that it perhaps was really just the ship's cat.

But he was not the only one to see such animals. Most reports come from the Fiordland area, where the dense bush and isolation might well shelter any number of odd animals. In 1811 passengers on board the brig *Mary and Sally* reported having seen a creature which they described as being similar to a hyena on Campbell Island.

In 1831 a group of sailors stationed at Dusky Bay had an even odder encounter. They reported having seen something resembling a huge kangaroo, some thirty feet high, which bounded quickly away, and swam away down the bay. Of course this sounds a little more unlikely, and was probably more to do with their rum consumption than anything else.

One of the most tenacious tales is about something living in the water. And there something slightly more believable about New Zealand having otters. The sightings of such creatures are numerous, and therefore more difficult to discount.

In 1884 an expedition through Canterbury and Otago heard from local Maori how there were beavers building homes and dams in the area. Then in 1848 an early collector of birds, Walter Mantell, wrote to his father of stories he had heard from Maori about an animal they called *kaureke*, which was described as about two feet long, furry, and laid eggs. Although Mantell offered a reward for the skin of the creature, he never got one. But other sources, such the Reverend R Taylor, and Tamihana Te Rauparaha also wrote about a similar creature.

Then in 1861 Doctor J von Haast stated in a letter to a friend that he was sure there was a quadruped living in the rivers and lakes of the isolated parts of the South Island. He'd seen the tracks and compared them to an otter's. Also in that same year there was a sighting reported on a property at Bottle Lake. One possible explanation comes from 1878 when an article in the newspaper suggested that the animal was in fact a mongoose. A Mr. Stevens in Otaitai Bush had caught one in his traps. Apparently several had been released earlier in an attempt to curb the rabbit problem. But then there have been a lot of sightings of a water creature swimming in lakes, and this does not really describe the mongoose. There are simply too many sightings to list here, and while many dismiss the idea, it persists remarkably strongly. Some have even observed the distinctive 'bubble chain' that is produced when a thickly furred creature dives under the water. The otter is certainly a very shy and retiring creature, known to travel at night, and be able to stay beneath water for a good time. Even in areas where it is known to live, it can be difficult to find. And there is even a Maori tradition of a small very otter-like creature the *waitoreke*. Theories abound- that it evolved here all by itself, that it is a marsupial, or even that it was bought to New Zealand by Tamil otterfishers.

But the persistent otter story is not the only strange creature seen in New Zealand. Maori have claimed to have seen a huge lizard five feet in length climbing through the trees, and again there are legends of the *kumi*, giant lizard in Maori myth. While in the Canterbury Plains lizards two or three feet long were said to live in burrows hidden in the scrub. Perhaps the tuatara is not the only creature to have survived the age of dinosaurs...

Birds also feature in the list of strange animals. There is the mysterious *hakuwai* bird, whose call is said to foretell disaster, and is heard often by muttonbirders. A writer for the Southland Times heard its odd call in 1913 late at night, and even reported hearing the sound of a huge bird passing overhead. In Stewart Island area the bird is supposed to only fly at night and have a seven-jointed wings.

And of course no discussion of strange animals would be complete without the "Moehau Monster". Described as seven feet tall man like creature, covered in silver white hair, and having large pink eyes. A visitor from Sydney claimed to have come face to face with this creature in 1969 in the Coromandel.

New Zealand is a largish land mass, about the same size at Britain, and yet its population numbers only about 4 million, so who is to say that hiding out in the dense bush something strange and unique is not waiting to be found.

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