MEETING - - - 7 July 1965

Mr. Ian Atkinson discussed the 'interactions between plants and animals of Hen Island'. I found this intensely interesting. Hen Island - the largest of the Hen and Chickens group, so called by Captain Cook on 25 November 1769 - lies some few miles off the Whangarei Heads. Mr. Atkinson described its volcanic nature, its early Maori occupation and cultivation, its plant covering and its bird and animal inhabitants. The island is steep and rocky, has little level ground and supports a coastal scrub forest - kanuka, puriri, taupata, pohutukawa, kowhai, karaka, Neopanax, parapara, tawapou, Cordyline, Xeronema, whau, Euphorbia glauca, puka, nikau etc. and I believe 3 species of Hebe - stricta, bollonsii and macrocarpa var latisepala. Birds are legion. Saddlebacks, bellbirds, blue penguins, pigeons, parakeets, brown kakas, moreporks and several petrel species, to mention only the more obvious. Among the animals the native rat - kiore, the gecko, tuatara and occasionally a leopard seal. Insects by the dozen and of course snails.

Mr. Atkinson's theme was 'who eats whom'. Kiore apparently eats everything in sight - buds, shoots, flowers, bark, seeds, worms, snails and fungi, and is in its turn eaten by the morepork, which digests the digestible and regurgitates the fur. The morepork is hounded by the saddlebacks who are kept awake by the petrels (mainly fluttering and allied shearwaters) and the penguins - which last make more noise than all the rest put together and sound like a collection of particularly bad tempered cats. The parakeets, with their pruning-shears beaks, destroy most of the seed they eat. The wattled, brightly piebald saddlebacks (themselves most rare) are related to the even rarer huia. In their near-frantic search for insects they strip the bark from the trees literally inch by inch. The petrels, with their burrowing and incessant coming and going, clear the undergrowth from large areas of scrub. The survival it would seem, not of the fit but of the lucky. There was of course much more to it than this - more than I can remember or have space to record. The sticky seeds of parapara, dragging feathers from the birds and even catching unwary wasps. Wetas, large and ugly, being devoured by timeless tuataras. Beautifully marked geckos sunning themselves on the rocks, unmoved by the sullen roar of ocean.

Illustrated by particularly good coloured slides and explanatory blackboard sketches, the whole was topped off with a tape recording of bird song !!! - not all of it at eventide - some in the early hours of the morning - and dominated by the dismal caterwauling of that little blue penguin. E.D.H.