

A FURTHER RECORD AND NOTES ON THE HOKIANGA TUSKED WETA

Gerald Messenger
C/- Post Office
Ahipara, Northland

On Sunday April 12th 1992 my son Craig, some friends, and I were walking in native bush in the Herekino Gorge area and, on descending to cross a stream, accidentally snapped off a short rotten branch of a tutu (*Coriaria*) shrub. To our great surprise an adult male Hokianga tusked weta *Hemiandrus*, was exposed. It was taken home and kept in a 300 x 300 x 200 mm aquarium but only survived for seven days despite being given a diversity of food to choose from - tutu leaves, honey, carrot, apple, feijoa, celery. I cannot be sure whether it fed or not.

The following weekend, Easter, five more specimens were found at the same place in the same tutu branch, all within 1.5 metres of the first discovery. Four of them, a male and three females were sheltering in a tunnel formed in the central cavity of the tutu branch. The male was nearest the entrance which he faced. Of the females the first faced the entrance, the second faced inwards, and the third

faced the entrance also. When disturbed the male made short lunges but did not leave his shelter.

The dead tutu branch was 20 mm in diameter with a soft pith centre. This had been hollowed out, probably by the wetas to form their refuge. Thus a straight, parallel-sided tunnel, circular in cross section was formed. The pith had been completely removed and the inner surface of the wood was clean and bright. The tunnel measured 92 mm in length and 8 mm in diameter. The inner termination has simply the remnant pith core damaged and eaten into by other insects and packed with dusty frass. At the entrance end of the tunnel a subsidiary tunnel had been excavated parallel with and open to it for its full length. It was 23 mm long, 5 mm in diameter, again circular in cross section but with a concave termination excavated in the wood. Whether or not it had been made by the wetas or was used by them is not known but certainly its surface was dark and full unlike the fresh appearance of the main tunnel. With the entrance hole orientated uppermost and the main tunnel viewed end on, this subsidiary tunnel was in the upper left quadrant. The main tunnel was too narrow for the wetas to turn around in. The entrance aperture was elliptical measuring 9.5 x 6.0 mm. The entrance hole went straight in at right angles to the long axis jump of the branch for a short distance before curving sharply to become the longitudinal tunnel.

The fifth weta was a small half-grown nymph inhabiting a very small hole on the same tutu branch. It too faced the entrance.

Specimens of the much larger common Auckland tree weta, *Hemideina thoracica* were also present in the same tutu bush. A similar situation existed with the Hokianga weta at Pakanae (Bellingham 1991). They utilised larger holes and always went into their refuge tunnels head first. It seem to be characteristic of the Hokianga tusked weta, especially the male, that it mostly backs into its shelter and comes out head first whereas the Auckland *Hemideina* goes in head first and backs out.

The Hokianga tusked weta is an active aggressive species which can jump like a grasshopper (the nymph jumped 500 mm). When being handled adults of both sexes are sensitive and jump as well as bite with both jaws and tusks in the case of the male. As the wetas are small the bite is little more than a slight prick. Also, when disturbed, the adults and nymph frequently stridulate producing a soft rasping sound as described in an earlier note (Messenger 1991). There is no leg movement during stridulation and even the body movement against the legs seems only slight. As described in the earlier note the feet remain on ground during stridulation.

REFERENCES

Bellingham M. 1991. Field observations on two species of tusked weta. *The Weta* 14 (August): 30-32.

Messenger, G. 1991. Notes on the Hokianga weta (*Hemiandrus monstrosus* Salmon, 1950). *The Weta* 14 (August): 10-11.

*