

Bird myths and legends

For hundreds of years Maori developed a sophisticated structure of beliefs and customs about the birds of Aotearoa / New Zealand. The basic myths and traditions came with the immigrants from legendary Hawaiiki, the original homelands in the Pacific. The best of the legends are true myths, disturbingly expressive of the deepest fears, needs and aspirations of the Maori people.

Changes the Maori made here to these legends were to give them relevance, to make them understandable in the new-found natural world. This is shown in the stories of Maui, the man-god hero who is known to islanders throughout the Eastern Pacific. When Maui sought to slay the goddess of death, Hine-nui-te-po, it was the small local birds such as the fantail, the robin and the whitehead that he took along for company.

Larger birds like the harrier (kahu) and morepork (ruru) had other tasks in the Maori world. They acted as messengers to the gods in the heavens, winging their way there along spiritual paths. They were the mediums used by tohunga to communicate with the gods. Tohunga also applied their skills to practical methods of bird catching. They read the signs of the sky, the foliage and the bird life. They oversaw the manufacture and storage of traps, lines and ladders used in hunting in the forests of Tane. They knew that Tane was the power and origin of all tree, bird and even human life. They recited the proper chants to him and other gods so that birds would be plentiful and the hunting successful.

From **Maori Bird Lore**, Murdoch Riley,
Viking Sevenses NZ Ltd, 2001.



A selection of legends follows. There are many more, and different iwi have different ones. Check with local tangata whenua for those appropriate to your area.

Maui and tieke (saddleback) stories

Story one

Once upon a time, Maui had a pet tieke called Te Wheke that always kept him company, sitting on his shoulder while he made the ropes from flax and the ti tree to make a net.

Maui's plan was to catch the sun in the net and beat him into submission so that he would slow down his frantic race around the globe. This was to prolong the daylight hours and to give people more time to perform their daily tasks.

So, on the fateful day that Maui decided to cast the net, his pet bird went with him. In the struggles to keep the sun in the net, Maui told his bird to go home, as the heat from the sun was so intense he was afraid that his pet's feathers would burn. In fact, he told the bird to go home several times, but each time tieke refused to leave.

Maui's hair was starting to melt in the heat, his skin was blistering and still tieke would not go home. So Maui grabbed the bird with his burnt hands and threw him down to the earth.

And that is why, to this day, the saddleback (tieke) has a burnt back.

From: NZ Tourism on line



Story two

The saddleback takes its English name from the band of colour running across the adult bird's back. According to Maori tradition, the saddle marking was caused by the man-god Maui, Maui-potiki.

This happened shortly after he and his brothers had snared the sun as it emerged from its cave. Maui beat the sun so mercilessly as it lay imprisoned close to the ground that it was greatly enfeebled. When the sun could take no more and pleaded for mercy, Maui released it. Its energy was all gone, so that it was able only slowly and wearily to make its way across the sky. Thus to this day we have longer daylight hours.

The heat of the sun and his exertions made Maui very thirsty so he asked the saddleback to bring him some cold water but the bird pretended not to hear and took no notice. This irritated Maui so much that he seized it and in doing so singed its feathers with the heat of his hand.

The markings on the back of tieke are a permanent reminder of how it incurred his displeasure. Maui then threw the bird away from him into the water that he had been unable to reach.

This is the reason that the tieke became known to Maori as water bird. It was mentioned in invocations recited when rain was needed, when calling on Rangi, the sky father, to give assistance through his many offspring who control the weather.

From: New Zealand Birds.com website: Narena Olliver
Riley, Murdoch, Maori Bird Lore, 2001.

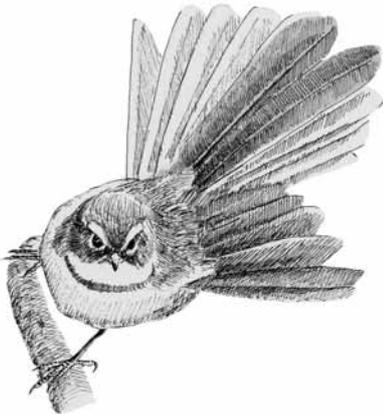
Story three

Ngatoroirangi, the great ancestor and priestly tohunga of the Te Arawa tribe, owned two pet saddlebacks. They were renowned for their supernatural powers and wisdom, and were claimed to be able to predict in their cries and manner of flight, a change in the weather and which way the wind would blow. Therefore, they had proved most helpful as pilots on the journey out from the Pacific with Te Arawa canoe.

The female sacred bird was named Mumuhau and the male bird Takareto. They stayed with Ngatoroirangi on Cuvier Island or Repanga and the saying is — Kei Repanga nga manu mohoi, ko Mumuhau, ko Takareto — At Repanga are the wise birds, Mumuhau and Takareto. Put another way — Manu mohoi kei Repanga — or to use an equivalent English expression: ‘old birds are not caught with chaff.’

They, or at least this bird species, continue to serve Maori at Cuvier Island as reliable barometers. The peculiar note of one is an unfailing sign of good weather, whilst the shrill cry of the other is a no less certain warning of storm.

From: New Zealand Birds.com website: Narena Olliver
Riley, Murdoch, Maori Bird Lore, 2001.



Maui and tiwakawaka (fantail)

It is in the stories of Maui that the tiwakawaka plays its most important role in Maori mythology. It got its appearance when it refused to tell Maui where his ancestress Mahuika kept fire hidden. In retaliation, Maui took the bird and squeezed it so hard that its eyes nearly popped out, hence their prominence now. This also explains why its tail projects so far behind its body and why it flies so erratically.

Let it now be said that the fantail got its revenge in full on Maui for his rough treatment by not obeying his instructions when it accompanied him on his last and greatest exploit to the realms of Hine-nui-te po.

In those far off days Hine-nui-te po, goddess of night, goddess of death, lived, as she does today, in the underworld of spirits. As mother of mankind, she has decreed from the troublesome earliest days of creation, that man should live one cycle of life, then die.

Maui's father said to him one day: ‘Oh, my son, I have heard from your mother and others that you are very valiant, and that you have succeeded in all feats that you have undertaken in your own country, whether they were small or great; but now that you have arrived in your father's country, you will, perhaps, at last be overcome.’

Then Maui asked him: ‘What do you mean, what things are there that I can be vanquished by?’

His father answered him: ‘By your great ancestress, by Hine-nui-te-po, who,

if you look, you may see flashing, and as it were, opening and shutting there, where the horizon meets the sky.’

Maui replied: ‘Lay aside such idle thoughts, and let us both fearlessly seek whether men are to die or live for ever.’

His father said: ‘My child, there has been an ill omen for us; when I was baptizing you, I omitted a portion of the fitting prayers, and that I know will be the cause of your perishing.’

Then Maui asked his father: ‘What is my ancestress Hine-nui-te-po like?’

His father replied: ‘You will see that her body is like that of a human being, but is of gigantic size, with thighs as red as the setting sun. You will see eyes of greenstone, flashing like the opening and shutting of the horizon in summer lightning. You will see teeth as sharp as flaked obsidian and a mouth like that of a barracuda, and hair like a tangled mass of sea kelp.’

Maui, always interested in a challenge, wanted to give mankind everlasting life, so he sought to kill Hine-nui-te-po and by doing so, abolish death forever.

Maui chose several bird companions besides the fantail to accompany him on his great quest.

Because he had the ability to change into many life forms, he was able to travel with these birds to the underworld as a sparrow hawk.

Maui’s objective was to enter the womb of Hine-nui-te-po when she was sleeping, and by passing through her vital organs to her mouth, to destroy death. He said to his companions, ‘My command is that when I enter the womb of Hine-nui-te-po, you must on no account laugh.’

So Maui, having taken on the form of the noke worm, then entered the womb but as he disappeared within, popokatea, the whitehead, and piwakawaka, the fantail, burst out laughing, whilst the fantail rushed about and began dancing with delight. And then Hine-nui-te-po was roused, closed her legs and strangled Maui and killed him.

**Abridged from Maori Bird Lore,
Murdoch Riley, Viking Sevensseas NZ Ltd.**



Maui's thirst

Maui, with the help of his brothers, tamed the sun so that it would move more slowly across the sky. After he had accomplished this, Maui lay exhausted and very thirsty, so he asked the birds of the forest, one by one, if they would bring him some water.

Tieke ignored his request, and upon asking and being ignored again, Maui became angry. He grabbed tieke, and his hot hand singed the feathers on tieke's back. Tieke still bears that mark today.

Maui was thirsty, so he called to hihi to fetch him some water. Hihi would not obey Maui, so Maui picked up hihi and threw him into the fire and hihi's feathers were burnt. The yellow and black on the male hihi is said to remind hihi of the sun and the fire.

Maui asked kokako to fetch him some water. Kokako obeyed Maui's wish. He did so by collecting the water in his wattles. To reward kokako, Maui stretched kokako's legs so he would have longer legs than any other bird in the forest and so be the envy of them all. Kokako would be able to move through water and mud without getting wet. Kokako leaps and bounds with joy to this day, in thankfulness.



Toutouwai was the only other forest bird who went to get Maui a drink. Some say toutouwai brought the water back in his eyes and that is why a toutouwai's eyes are sometimes watery. As a reward, Maui made the feather tufts on Toutouwai's forehead white as a sign the bird was now sacred.

From a presentation to Tiritiri Matangi guides by Sarah Galbraith.

When kiwi lost his wings

One day, Tanemahuta was walking through the forest. He looked up at his children reaching for the sky and he noticed that they were starting to sicken, as bugs were eating them.

He talked to his brother, Tanehokahoka, who called all of his children, the birds of the air, together.

Tanemahuta spoke to them.

'Something is eating my children, the trees. I need one of you to come down from the forest roof and live on the floor, so that my children can be saved, and your home can be saved. Who will come?'

All was quiet and not a bird spoke.

Tanehokahoka turned to tui.

'E tui, will you come down from the forest roof?'

Tui looked up at the trees and saw the sun filtering through the leaves. Tui looked down at the forest floor and saw the cold, dark earth and shuddered.

‘Kao, Tanehokahoka, for it is too dark and I am afraid of the dark.’

Tanehokahoka turned to pukeko.

‘Pukeko, will you come down from the forest roof?’

Pukeko looked down at the forest floor and saw the cold, damp earth and shuddered.

‘Kao, Tanehokahoka, for it is too damp and I do not want to get my feet wet.’

All was quiet and not a bird spoke.

Tanehokahoka turned to pipiwharau.

‘Pipiwharau, will you come down from the forest roof? Pipiwharau looked up at the trees and saw the sun filtering through the leaves. Pipiwharau looked around and saw his family.

‘Kao, Tanehokahoka, for I am busy at the moment building my nest.’

All was quiet and not a bird spoke. And great was the sadness in the heart of Tanehokahoka, for he knew, that if one of his children did not come down from the forest roof, not only would his brother lose his children, but the birds would have no home.

Tanehokahoka turned to kiwi.

‘E kiwi, will you come down from the forest roof?’

Kiwi looked up at the trees and saw the sun filtering through the leaves. Kiwi looked around and saw his family. Kiwi looked at the cold damp earth. Looking around once more, he turned to Tanehokahoka and said, ‘I will.’

Great was the joy in the hearts of Tanehokahoka and Tanemahuta, for this little bird was giving them hope. But Tanemahuta felt that he should warn kiwi of what would happen.

‘E kiwi, do you realise that if you do this, you will have to grow thick, strong legs so that you can rip apart the logs on the ground and you will lose your beautiful coloured feathers and wings so that you will never be able to return to the forest roof? You will never see the light on day again.’

All was quiet and not a bird spoke.

‘E kiwi, will you come down from the forest roof?’

Kiwi took one last look at the sun filtering through the trees and said a silent goodbye. Kiwi took one last look at the other birds, their wings and their coloured feathers, and said a silent goodbye. Looking around once more, he turned to Tanehokahoka and said, ‘I will.’

Then Tanehokahoka turned to the other birds and said,

‘E tui, because you were too scared to come down from the forest roof, from now on you will wear the two white feathers at your throat as the mark of a coward.’





Pukeko, because you did not want to get your feet wet, you will live forever in the swamp.

Pipiwaharuroa, because you were too busy building your nest, from now on you will never build another nest again, but lay your eggs in other birds' nests.

But you kiwi, because of your great sacrifice, you will become the most well-known and loved bird of them all.'

From: [BNZ Kiwi Recovery website](#).

Rata and his canoe

The great chief Rata needed a large, strong canoe. He planned a sacred journey to bring back his father's bones for burial in his own village; so he spent much time searching for a suitably noble tree, with a straight, bare trunk that rose 20 metres in the air before spreading out into branches. He searched far and wide, and then one day he found his tree, surrounded by much smaller ones.

Rata, without any ceremony, began to chop the tree with his sharpest axe. Chips began to fly as he hacked away at the base of the tree. Then suddenly the job was done. The great tree crashed with a roar through the undergrowth. Rata next attacked the top part of the tree, so that it soon fell away with all its branches, leaving the main trunk to be shaped into a canoe. Seeing that the sun was low in the sky, he packed up his tools and went home.

He had no sooner left, than out they came from their hiding places – the teeming multitudes of birds and insects, who are the children of Tane. Indignant at the lack of respect shown by Rata to the god of the forests they uttered this incantation:

*The chips fly,
The roots fly.
They are nearby,
They are sticking,
They become a tree again.*

Immediately, with the help of the birds, the trunk stood upright on its stump and the branches returned to their former positions. Meanwhile the insects were busy, each had a job to do. Every chip, every fragment of leaf, no matter how small, had to be put back in place. In a moment the tree was standing as before, looking as if nothing had ever happened to it.

Next morning when Rata arrived, he looked about him in bewilderment. Where was the tree that he had cut down yesterday? He looked up and rubbed his eyes. Then he looked again. The tree was standing upright, as when he first saw it. Perhaps he had only dreamt he cut it down.

Once more set to work. He cut the tree down, trimmed the branches off, and hollowed out the trunk until the shape of a great canoe began to emerge. Then, as night was coming on, he stopped work and went back to his village.

Again, as soon as he had left, the children of Tane came hurrying out. As before, they chanted their incantation, never resting until once more the tree was back in place.

Rata was baffled when he returned next morning. He stood awhile, then he shrugged his shoulders and once more faced the tree. The chips began to fly, and the mystery was soon forgotten in the sheer joy of carving. At evening Rata gathered his tools together and went away. But instead of going home he hid himself in some bushes, and waited.

They came from everywhere – rustling, whirring, scurrying, flying. They gathered round his canoe and chanted:

*Leave it, leave it, O Rata
You have cut it ignorantly –
The sacred grove of Tane
The chips fly,
The roots fly,
They are near,
They are sticking
They become a tree again.*

Rata saw the trunk stand upright and the branches rise into place. He saw a blizzard of flying chips, as the tree rapidly returned to its former shape. The mystery was explained.

‘The tree belongs to Tane,’ the creatures said. ‘You did not ask him for permission to cut it down.’

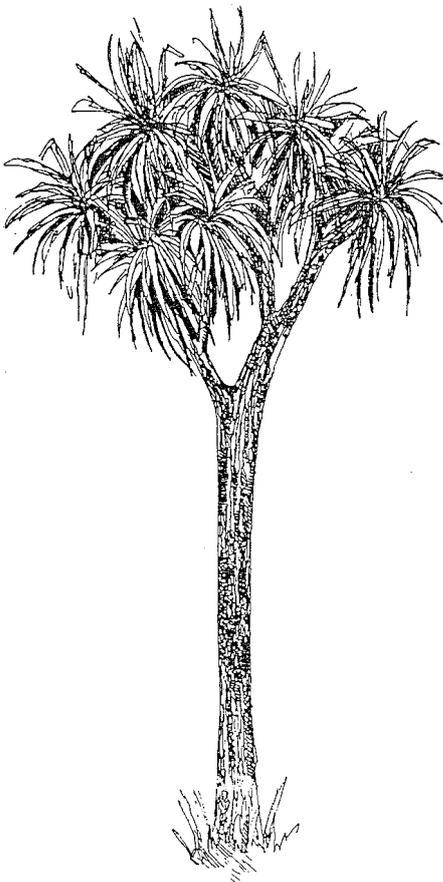
Then Rata was ashamed and hung his head, and said nothing.

The children of Tane saw that he was ashamed, and felt sorry for him. ‘Go home,’ they said, ‘and leave the tree to us. We shall build your canoe for you.’

Rata then went home and slept, and when morning came, he returned to the forest. There it was, exactly as he had imagined it would be, when he first saw the tree. Twenty metres long, superbly carved and decorated, it was a canoe fit for the sacred purpose that he had in mind.

Overjoyed at his good fortune, Rata made offerings to great Tane, god of the forest, and then began preparations to move his canoe down to the sea.

From: Birds of New Zealand website, Narena Olliver (adapted)



Hatupatu, Kurangaituku, and riroriro (grey warbler)

While he was out hunting kereru one day, the great chief Hatupatu was captured by the giant mountain mist fairy, Kurangaituku. She took him to her home to keep him as one of her pets, just like the many bird pets she had.

One day Hatupatu tricked Kurangaituku into searching far away for a special treat for him, and while Kurangaituku was away, Hatupatu made his escape, blocking up the walls of the house before he did so to prevent her bird pets from flying after her and telling of his escape.

Unfortunately Hatupatu accidentally left a tiny chink in the wall unblocked and tiny riroriro, the grey warbler, managed to squeeze through. Flying fast in the evening sky, riroriro caught up with Kurangaituku and warned her of Hatupatu's escape.

Kurangaituku chased Hatupatu all over the lands of Rotorua until they came to the boiling springs of Whakarewarewa, where Kurangaituku fell in and was drowned.

Thus Hatupatu escaped, but the little grey warbler continues to this day to tell the mist fairy that her human pet has escaped and gone, gone, gone; 'Riro – Riro – Riro'.

