



The Ghost of the Huia

Clinging to a branch a sturdy but slender black bird is gazing at you. Its appearance catches the eye: the bright orange wattles stand out from its glossy black plumage, the long curved ivory white beak gives a touch of mystery to it, a sense of dignity and pride, but at the same time of restlessness. Your eyes are quickly drawn to the long feathers composing the majestic tail ending in a bright white fan tip. The feathers are

of the same kind as the ones adorning the heads of the deceased in Māori's funeral ceremonies. Maybe it was already a dreadful omen of the bird's fate. In fact, this bird, which looks at you with its warm brown gaze, it is none other than a ghost of a species which disappeared over a hundred years ago.

The huia was a native species of New Zealand, endemic to the forests of New Zealand's North Island, and its last confirmed sighting dates back to 1907. Like spirits are revered and respected in many cultures, also the huia was sacred to the Māori people. Its feathers were worn by high-rank chiefs, given as token of friendship and respect or traded as valuable objects. But not only its feathers were making it such a special bird. Its most striking peculiarity became evident once a female and male individual were placed side by side. The slightly larger female huia had a long curved beak, while the one of the male was short and robust. The sexual dimorphism in the bill shape allowed birds of different sex to exploit different food resources. The male extracted insects and spiders by chiselling and ripping out the outer layers of decaying wood, while the female with its long and curved beak was also able to reach burrows of insects larvae in living wood.

The huia particular appearance and ecology enhanced human's admiration for this species, but also marked its extinction. Its fragile existence depended on old-growth forests, rich in rotting trees and mosses, as the huia seemed to not be able to survive in regenerating secondary forests. The huia was also a weak flier as many of the native New Zealand's bird species and was therefore particularly vulnerable to mammalian predators on the ground. It was also an easy catch for Māori hunters which attracted the birds by imitating its call. Yet, the hunt of this sacred bird was strictly regulated by traditional protocols and allowed the bird population to recover.

The settlement of European colonialists on the island, however, caused a drastic decline in huia

numbers due to massive deforestation and the introduction of invasive mammalian predators, such as rodents and cats. Its sacred beauty and unique sexual dimorphism made the huia object of interest of many studies as well as a highly demanded item by over-seas collectors and museums. This led to an extreme overhunting by the hands of naturalists themselves. The already weakened huia population was therefore doomed to disappear.

Huias were shot down to the last individual. Naturalists were fascinated by this majestic bird, but there was no interest in preserving it. Its disappearance or replacement was not only allowed but even seen as a sign of the European species strength, as the ideology of the time considered the native colonial biodiversity, as well as culture and people, inferior to the European one, thus not worthy to be protected.

Many huias were killed and sent to Europe, as the female individual collected by Friedrich Finsch we see today at the Biodiversity Museum, a victim of a racist current of thought. But while in the past it was just considered an object decorating vitrines, today it represents something more. Today it is a tangible memory of a species belonging to a distant past, a testimonial of the exploitation of an entire land. It is a ghost haunting a museum. With its presence it reminds us of social and environmental injustices and of the responsibility we have today towards what we still have left.

Matilde Montagna

Female specimen of a Huia
(*Heteralocha acutirostris*)

Collected in 1891 by Friedrich Finsch, New Zealand. Collection of the Biodiversity Museum of Göttingen.