

Huia report

"*E hoa ma, puritia mai taku huia, Friends hold onto my Huia*". But we didn't. We cut down their homes. Brought in deadly pests. And worst of all, killed them for money. We did the exact opposite of that pleading Maori phrase from the early 1900's. The Huia was a clever North Island song bird, a tribute to Maori heritage and one of New Zealand's most trusting song birds of all time. But sadly all of these things led to its downfall.

You may be wondering, what is it? This famous New Zealand bird was one of 6 native songbirds; its relations being the North and South Island Kokako, the Kereru, the Tui and the long extinct Saddleback. Huias were recognised by their distinctive black bodies with white tipped tails. With those plain colours, orange wattles stood out proudly beneath stunning black beaks. Female Huias beaks were curved and elegant while the males had rather thick masculine one. This was how poachers could tell the female and male Huias apart. Because Huias used to mate for life these gastly, fame seeking, monsters would shoot the female first. Stupefied, her partner would rush to her aid. Only to become the next victim.



Local Maori used to kill Huias as well, only their ways were more humane. By using Tare (long handled snares) the Maori would attract Huias down by imitating their call. Once dead the birds were plucked and skinned. Feathers were then used for making cloaks and headdresses. 2 or 3 tail feathers were sometimes worn in the hair of village people or grieving family as a sign of respect at a tangi (funeral). Chiefs would also wear 12 of those stunning feathers in a fan shape in his hair as well. Plumage from the centre of the tails were more popular and expensive then from the outsides because the line where the black turned into white was straight. That is why the middle feathers were more commonly worn by chiefs. The elegant beaks of females were also worn as ear ornaments by women. It was the Maori who in the late 1800s decided that these birds should be made tapu. But this was too little too late for the Huias.

In a way, Huias decided their own fate. They had a curious nature and just couldn't resist having a closer look at things that might have been a threat to them. This made them incredibly vulnerable! Humans used to mimic their cry to get them to come closer, the minute they did it was all over. Another fault of this bird is that they used to land on hands; just another small thing that led to such a tragedy. Huias lived on the lower branches of the forest as they didn't fly well. Huias had sharp claws on their feet that helped them to cling vertically to trees while they rested and ate. All of these things made the Huia incredibly easy to shoot and kill during hunting expeditions. During one particular expedition led by Walter Pearson, the men came back with 16 birds in total! 16 innocent creatures. It was greedy people like Walter who did the most damage to the Huia population.

So now you know what it was. How it died. And what humans did to it. I sincerely hope you are feeling guilty. Because even though you in particular didn't do anything to this beautiful bird, it could've been your relations who did. Don't get me wrong, I'm pointing no fingers. Someone who was feeling guilty about the terrible downfall of Huias was a local North Island Maori, he wrote this quote- *huia e huia, tangata kotahi*. Huia, your destiny is to bring everyone together.

