

THE SPIRIT OF SERPENTINE (Episode 1)

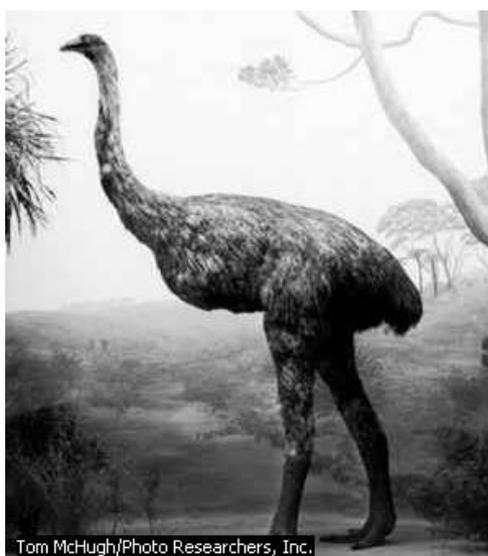
Once upon a time a small group of flightless birds, mostly Ratites, sought refuge from predators in the low scrub of the Serpentine valley.

Soon the Rheas were busy clearing the land with their powerful three toed claws. The Emus puffed their powerful thoraxes into wind and trampled down a narrow strip of vegetation. The Ostriches followed, rooting the earth with omnivorous beaks. This allowed the fat Cassowaries to compact and sweep the ground with their leathery wattles hanging from their necks. The Kiwis, the fourth species of Ratites, used their slender bills to write a set of complicated rules to live happily ever after by excluding all other birds. So was the beginning of the Serpentine Flock of Flightless Birds.

Hidden in the forest, away from preying eyes, they sought to regain the dignity of flight which their ancestors had lost to win terrestrial traits. Their powerful legs would generate sufficient speed to propel them into the air. Aided by the prevailing breeze from the south west, they would flap down wind and onto base to land to the scrutiny of all the other Ratites.

With time, ingenious machines were built to lift them high in the sky so that they could travel far. Gradually those scrubs of Serpentine were transformed into a wondrous air park, which has become the envy of many. At times the flightless birds entertain terrestrial animals with choreographies of formations and aerobatic displays. The many exploits to gain the art of flight is what these pages are all about.

Let's not begin at the beginning, but many years after. The serenity of the Serpentine Flock has been challenged many times, but none as severely as the episode of Moas, the extinct flightless bird which once ruled parts of New Zealand.



The following are fictional characters. Any resemblance to reality is purely unintentional and totally coincidental.

THE SERPENTINE FLOCK

The Episode of Moas (The Elephant Bird)

It is hard to tell when it all began. It was either a Kakapo or a Penguin, but definitely not a Ratite who started the turmoil. After migrating from the northern shores, in search of the warmth of the southern skies, he sought refuge among the Serpentine Flock. Unprepared for the many rules penned by the fine bill of the Kiwi bird, he waddled in, as if he owned the place.

"Sounds like a parrot and he's green. He's probably a canary and can fly better than we." The Council of Ratites confabulated. "There is no room!" They announced.

Shocked by the rejection, he shouted: "I have friends in high places and will seek legal advice." So the plotting began.

Meanwhile the council was busy evicting one of their own members. They discovered he was a Penguin, which is an aquatic bird and therefore not a Ratite. Because birds of a feather flock together, soon the Penguins were squawking in unity: "Down with the Council".



The Secretary bird¹ would have no nonsense. With the help of the Council he formalized the Rules. There would be no exceptions. Only Ratites could nest at Serpentine and all males had to incubate the eggs. "I want a nest, but I can't incubate" some thought. Others were unashamed. "I am a Ratite. I will keep my nest and others can incubate for me." In an effort to quell the flock, the chief of Council, who is a Cassowary (see below) and carries the title of Cock, called for a vote of confidence.



The turmoil bubbled over when Moa, the Elephant bird, which many thought was extinct, appeared from nowhere to accuse the Council of high treason. "He alone could save the Serpentine Flock from the treachery of the Rules." He announced that he would nominate for the position of Cock. In accordance with the Rules, billed by the Kiwi bird, a long time ago, Moas had been declared extinct and therefore ineligible for that position. He could only be revived by

¹ A bird of prey endowed with quills tucked behind the ear.

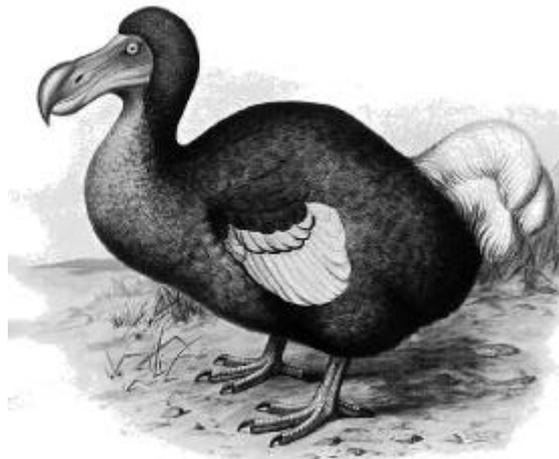
twelve months as a common council member. Fearing promulgation of the Rules, those who would not incubate shouted: "Shame, invalid, undemocratic; we want Moa to be the Cock."

Another strange bird appeared from nowhere to give an auditory display by declaring the powwow illegal. The Council was lost for words, but could not avoid the responsibility of incubation and called for a vote. Suddenly from the wings of the stage an Emu, almost as tall as the Elephant bird, pounced upon the gathering with the excuse of restoring order and unity. He demanded a mediation adjournment between Moa and the Cock. The rest of the flock looked on with amazement.

"A compromise was reached" the Emu declared. The Rooster will remain Cock and Moa, if elected, will be revived as a member of Council. The flock was about to vote when the green bird interjected. He was concerned that only Moa could guarantee his nesting rights at Serpentine. "Postal votes may have excluded the Elephant bird from Council because of his nomination as Cock." The green bird pontificated. "We want new ballots! We want a new powwow!" A loud squawk reverberated from the floor.

Before the meeting could be closed the Dodo, from the Portuguese word duodo, read a long list of rhetorical questions which probably explained why its species have become extinct.

So it is that the Serpentine Flock decided not to decide. There will be another powwow where each species will make their ritual display of their incubatory prowess.



The reality remains that the same few Ratites will continue to make the Serpentine Flock of Flightless Birds the wonderful place it is, irrespective of how many male birds will agree to incubate the eggs.