



# Wetas— New Zealand's Insect Giants

Text and photographs by  
MARK W. MOFFETT

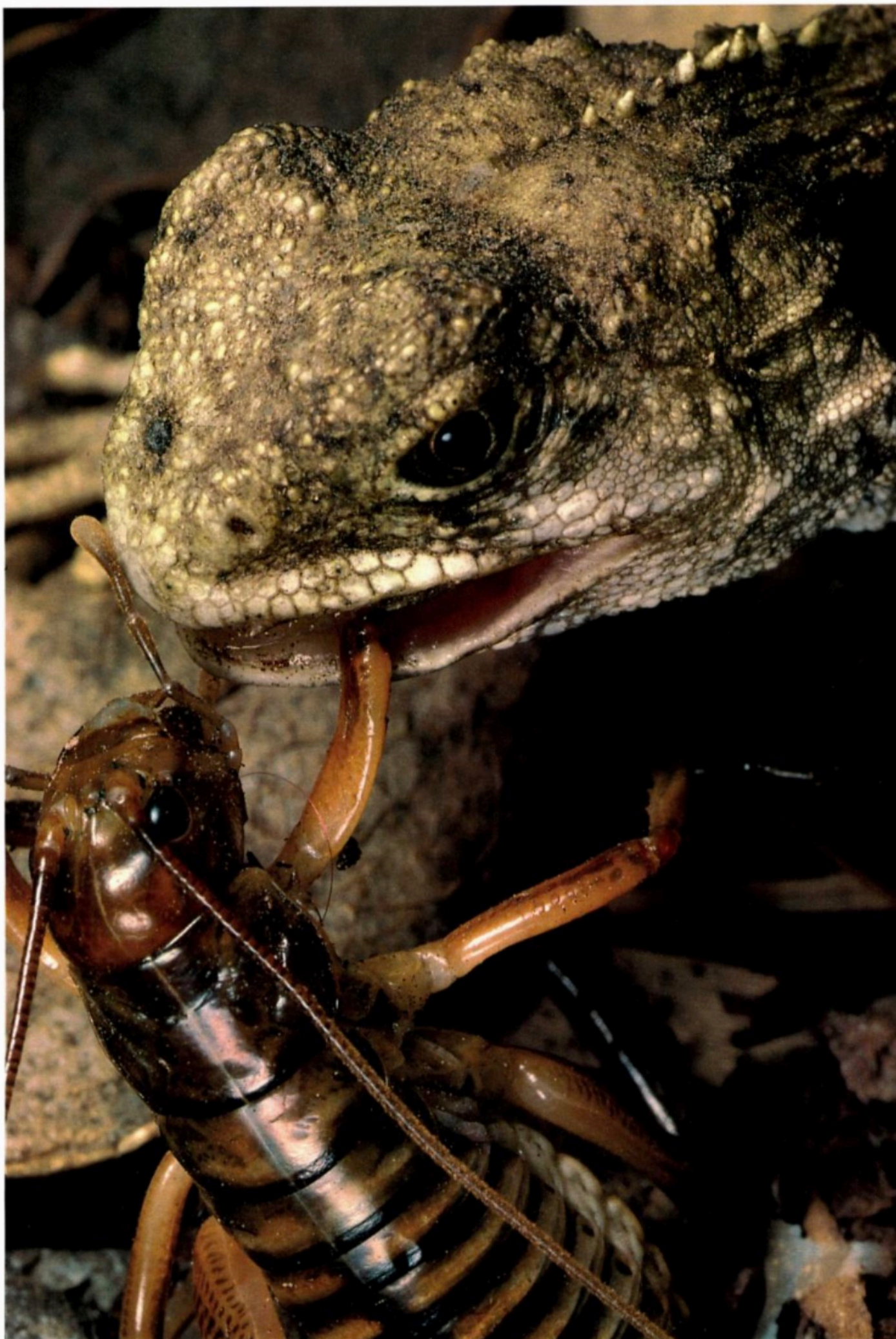


**H**ANDFUL of legs and spines, a giant weta from Little Barrier Island devours a carrot. About as big as a house mouse, this *Deinacrida heteracantha* weighs in at two-thirds of her species' record 2.5 ounces. The largest of the ten species of giant wetas beat most of the world's biggest insects in weight and bulk, but not all the so-called giants reach this size.

New Zealanders call all their wingless, cricket-like insects wetas. Little changed in 200 million years, they are among New Zealand's oldest native life-forms.

Smaller than some of the giants but still imposing, an alarmed tree weta—*Hemideina crassidens*—kicks at entomologist Simon Pollard in a primal rain forest on South Island.





**T**HE END IS NEAR for a tree weta, *Hemideina crassicornis*, caught on Stephens Island by a tuatara (left), a dinosaur relative that lives only on isolated islets off New Zealand. In the absence of native mammalian predators, evolution has often produced awkward, flightless creatures like kiwis and wetas.

Common in much of the country, most tree wetas have adjusted to changes brought by human colonization. But habitat destruction and introduced predators, especially rats, have generally reduced giant wetas to main-island enclaves and

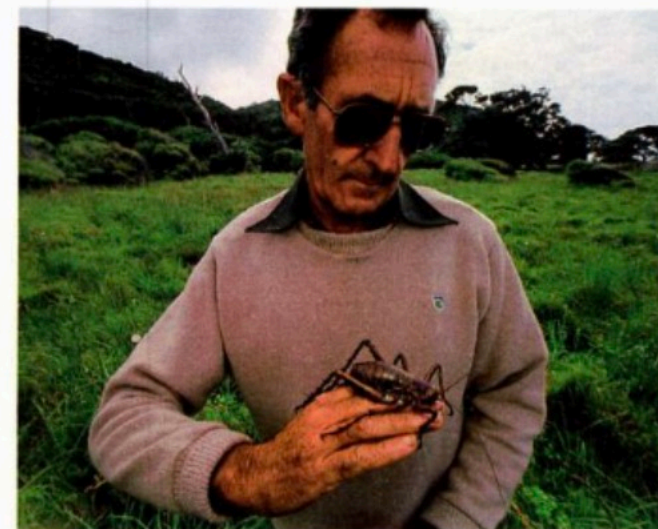


offshore islands (map).

One giant species discovered near Mahoenui in 1963 and still unnamed finds protection in gorse bushes brought from Europe (top right). Surprised in the open, another Mahoenui giant scares away a mouse by lashing out with its spiny back legs—a defense many wetas use.







**M**OST WETAS live in low-land forests, but the mountain weta, *Hemideina maori*, thrives beneath rocks above the tree line. University of Canterbury entomologist Peter Johns has uncovered one and looks for more (left) in Mount Cook National Park, one of several South Island areas that harbor this species.

The rarer *Deinacrida heteracantha* is found only on Little Barrier Island, a restricted-access nature reserve. Retired island ranger Alex Dobbins (above) takes a close look at one of these giants. Known to the native Maori as wetapunga, they once also inhabited the northern part of North Island.

Government efforts to protect these and other endangered wetas have included tailoring conservation strategies to the needs of individual species. "We don't have giant pandas in New Zealand; we have giant wetas," says Johns, explaining the growing interest in these insects. "It's just great to have something that's different." □