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Objekttyp: **Group**

Zeitschrift: **Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand**

Band (Jahr): **74 (2008)**

Heft [10]

PDF erstellt am: **08.08.2024**

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How can I concentrate on writing? Outside my study window the paradise duck family is grazing the lawn, and fertilising it as they go. I swear they should be on the gardener's payroll! The family dynamics are fascinating: The two always-watchful parents station themselves at either end of the brood of ducklings, half-grown now. They've raised ten of an original clutch of twelve, which is credit to their fiercely protective parenting.

How fierce, I saw one day when I was out walking, when the ducklings were tiny and only two days out of hiding. A pukeko leapt on a duckling, grabbed it by the back of the neck, and started to drag it into the bushes. The duck and drake rushed to its defence, and out of a huge flurry and flapping the duckling emerged, seemingly little worse for its narrow escape.

But I fear the paradise ducks have themselves killed the four ducklings the brown scaup hatched. These beautiful little brown ducks are divers, and their ducklings scoot over the water at high speed - but not fast enough to escape the paradise mother duck who wants all of the lake for her young.

The pukeko families are socially interesting. They run a nursery system, and, I think, a harem! Our "locals" are three adults (two females and a male), and six chicks - three larger and three small, so from two different broods. All three parents solicit food from us or grab it from the garden and lawn, and feed whichever chick is closest or begging loudest. The elegance of a pukeko's eating style leaves many of us humans looking clumsy. They hold food in one raised foot, and nip pieces fastidiously from it, either for themselves or for the chicks - then throw away the parts they don't fancy. In Altenrhein, the *meisli* hold the sunflower seeds securely between their feet on the elder branch as they peck at it.

All this entertainment and drama in the back yard!

I laugh at myself. Only a few years ago I would have been horrified to think that I could spend an hour doing nothing more than watching birds - or, as I do in Altenrhein, spend a whole afternoon in the deck chair with a book. And do that again the next day. And the next. This discovery of my late-flowering talent for doing nothing is a surprising joy. I think I am truly cut out for a partially retired life-style.

While I'm bird-watching, Mani is off at a stone-carving workshop. He has approached stone sculpture in a gloriously reversed fashion. Some years ago, we



Mani with work in progress

went to the Stone Symposium at Frank Kitts Park, and Mani said he'd like to try that. Mmm, I said, thinking he'd start with a little block of nice soft Oamaru stone. Not Mani! We stopped at the quarry on Takaka Hill, and he chose a marble rock - just 2.5 tonne. It arrived up in Maupuia, and chip by chip he carved a fabulous head from it. We sold that with the house, much to the moving men's relief! Having accomplished what must be the hardest way to start out, and with no tuition at all, he's now starting from the other end with a weekend workshop on Oamaru stone. In true Mani style, he has gone with an ambitious design charted out in a template: we'll report on progress!

You'll have heard the news that the EU is dropping its "standards" on fruit and vegetables. The curve of a cucumber is no longer the business of the b-eurocrats. (The mis-spelling is deliberate - sound it out.)

Up in Kapiti, we head for the Paraparaumu Beach market on a Saturday morning. Buying fresh produce from the people who grow it is so much more satisfying than the supermarket - and there's the pleasure of cutting out the middle-man: The producers get more for their produce than they do selling at auction or on contract; we pay less than we do when we're paying the supermarket overheads - and there's the bonus of the human connection.

I thought it would be the same in the farmers' road-side stalls in Switzerland - but there's one big difference: The price! The farmers generally sell at higher prices than the supermarkets do, even taking into account the fact that Swiss-grown supermarket produce normally gets a premium over *Ausland* stuff, despite the *Auslanders'* EU standardisation! Nevertheless, we see walkers and cyclists stop at all the stalls in our neck of the woods, probably for the same reason that we like the market and road-side stalls here: You know where the food has come from - it feels like the next best thing to having grown it yourself. We're hoping for a little reciprocity from one farmer's wife who does well from the passing trade. So - as we make a cure of this season's fresh asparagus - we think back to the stalls up the Rheintal where they were selling local asparagus for 18 - 24Fr a kilo. It looked beautiful - uniform fat straight spears that would have gladdened an EU bureaucrat's heart. Green asparagus, white asparagus, and purple, marshalled in tidy rows - and with people queuing to pay the price. We looked, marvelled, and left.

Which reminds me - it's my turn to cook tonight. *En quete!*