



wētā

BY PHILIPPA WERRY

Many people are scared of wētā. They are big and covered in spikes, they hide in dark places, and they can sometimes jump. You might find one in the garden or in a piece of old wood. There could be one hiding in your letterbox – or even in your shoe!

But don't worry – wētā can't really hurt you. At worst, they might give you a nip if you try to pick them up. It's the wētā that should be scared of you because many of them are **endangered**.

Types of wētā

Wētā are similar to crickets and grasshoppers. Those insects can be found in other parts of the world. The name wētā is used only in New Zealand.

There are five types of wētā:

- ground wētā
- tree wētā
- giant wētā
- tusked wētā
- cave wētā



Giant wētā



Tusked wētā

Each of these types includes many different **species**. For example, there are over fifty species of cave wētā. New species of wētā are still being found.

Why are wētā endangered?

Before people arrived in Aotearoa, only birds, bats, and tuatara hunted wētā. People brought rats, cats, stoats, and ferrets with them. These animals will all eat wētā if they get the chance. Wētā don't have wings, so they can't fly away to escape danger.

Some wētā will bite, scratch, or use the spines on the backs of their legs if they're attacked. Others will burrow into a hiding place so they can't be seen. But that's not much of a defence against large **predators**. One way to keep wētā safe is to take them to new homes on islands that don't have any predators.

Predators are one threat to wētā. Another threat is loss of **habitat**. If forests are cut down and not replaced, wētā will have nowhere to live.



More about wētā

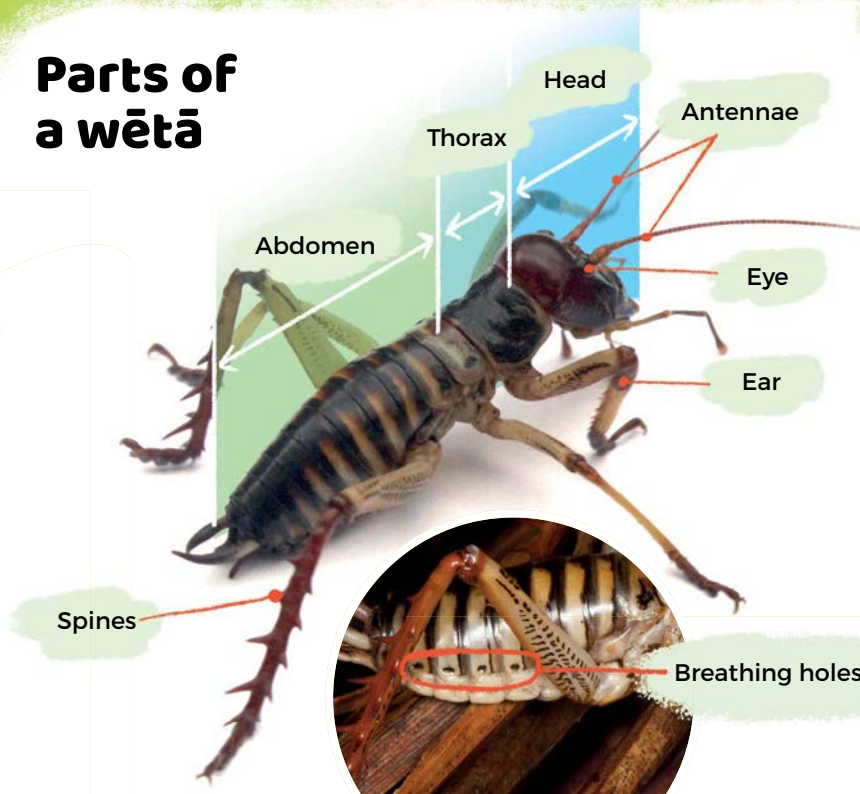
Wētā are **nocturnal**, which means they come out at night to feed. They don't have noses – they breathe through holes in the sides of their bodies. Three types of wētā (tree, giant, and tusked) have ears on their front legs!

In autumn, female wētā lay their eggs in the soil. The eggs hatch the next spring.

Why do wētā look like they're wearing tiny suits of armour? It's because their **skeletons** are on the outside. This hard covering helps to protect them. But the skeleton of a wētā doesn't stretch, so as the young wētā gets bigger, it has to get rid of its skeleton

and grow a new one. This is called moulting. Wētā moult up to ten times as they grow.

Parts of a wētā



A wētā moulting



Cave wētā

Cave wētā often live in groups. Despite their name, they don't only live in caves. They live in other dark, damp places as well. You might find them under rocks or loose bark. They could be in rotten logs or holes in trees.

Cave wētā are smaller than other wētā. They have long, thin legs that are good for jumping. (They are also called jumping wētā.) Their **antennae** are also very long. They use them to feel around and find food. Cave wētā like to eat fruit, leaves, fungi, and dead insects.

Cave wētā have no ears at all. Instead, they sense vibrations through their feet and antennae.

Amazing wētā

Wētā have been around for over 100 million years. Scientists have found fossils that show wētā lived at the same time as the dinosaurs.

So next time you see one, don't jump with fright – take a moment to stop and think about what amazing creatures they are.

Glossary

antennae: long, thin feelers on the head of an insect, used mostly for touching and sensing things

endangered: close to becoming extinct (dying out)

habitat: the type of place where something usually lives

nocturnal: active at night

predator: an animal that hunts another animal

skeleton: a hard structure, usually made of bone, that supports the body of a living thing

species: a group of living things that are similar and are able to produce young



Ground wētā



Tree wētā

Wētā

by Philippa Werry

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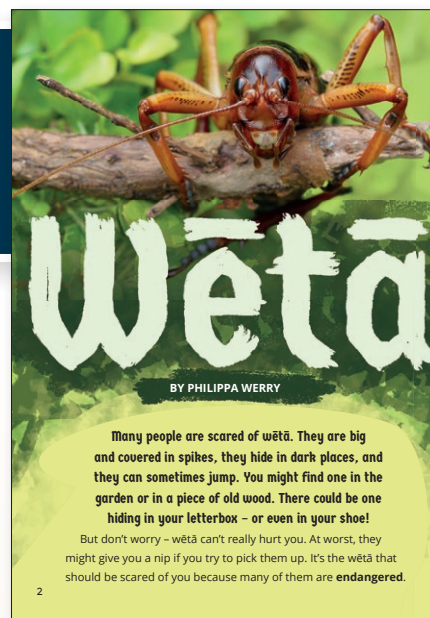
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