

Pōhā: A Clever Way of Storing Food

by Dr Michael Stevens

Nowadays, food is packed in cans or put in the freezer to keep it in good condition until we want to eat it. But before there were cans and freezers, people had other ways of storing food.

One way that Māori stored food was to pack it into pōhā. Pōhā are bags made from a special kind of kelp called rimurapa. Some Māori still make pōhā. They use them to store tītī meat. Tītī are seabirds. They are also known as muttonbirds.

Facts about tītī

- Tītī are the most common seabird in New Zealand.
- There are more than 40 million of them in the world.
- They are also known as sooty shearwaters and grey-faced petrels.

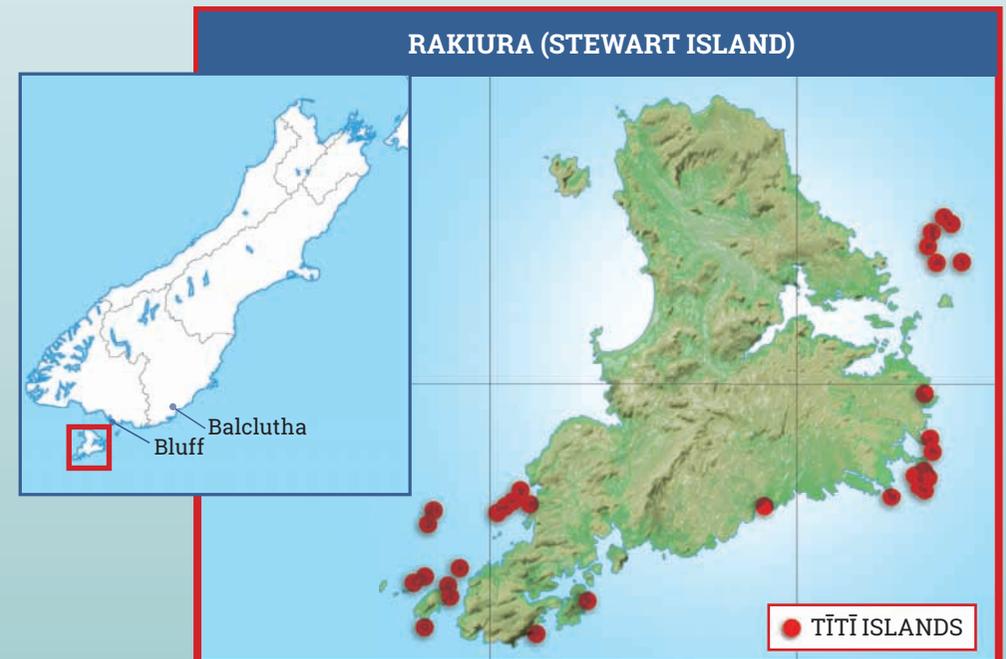


Muttonbirding

Although tītī fly all around the world, they only lay their eggs on particular islands in the southern hemisphere. Some of these islands are near Rakiura (Stewart Island). Several **Kāi Tahu** families have houses on these islands. They visit them every year in April and May.

These days, family members travel to the islands by boat or sometimes by helicopter, but they have the same reason for making the journey as their **tīpuna**: they go there to harvest tītī chicks for food. This is called muttonbirding.

Tītī are a very popular kai, especially with Māori. They are often cooked for important events such as birthdays, weddings, or tangi.



Catching the tītī

The muttonbirding harvest has two parts. The *nanao* is when muttonbirders catch the tītī chicks in the daytime by pulling the birds out of their burrows. The *rama* is when muttonbirders catch the tītī chicks on dark, stormy nights, when the chicks come out of their burrows by themselves.

After the chicks have been killed, their feathers are plucked. Then they are gutted and coated with salt. Most muttonbirders pack the tītī into plastic buckets to take them back to the mainland. Each bucket holds about twenty tītī.

However, a few muttonbirding families still pack their tītī into pōhā. Tiny Metzger is a **kaumātua** from Bluff. He knows a lot about pōhā. His **tāua** taught him how to make them when he was a boy. Tiny has taught his grandchildren how to make pōhā, too.



Getting ready to make pōhā

A pōhā is made from three things: a kelp bag, a kete, and strips of tōtara bark. Tiny and his family start preparing early so that these things are all ready by the start of the harvest season each April.

First, they pull layers of bark off big, old tōtara trees. They take only a small amount from each tree, and only every few years. That way, they don't hurt the tree. They cut the pieces of bark into strips. Then, at Christmas time, they cut **harakeke** and weave it into kete. In February, they gather rimurapa to make the kelp bags.

To get the rimurapa (also called bull kelp), Tiny and his family wait for sunny weather and a very low tide. They know some places where rimurapa grows on rocks along sandy beaches. One of these places is Kaka Point, near Balclutha. The family walk onto the rocks and cut about a hundred pieces of the kelp. They choose rimurapa that is the right size and shape to make bags.



Facts about rimurapa

- Rimurapa is a type of seaweed. It grows on New Zealand's rocky coastlines, mostly in the South Island.
- The inside of rimurapa looks a lot like a honeycomb. This helps the rimurapa to float on the water. Blades of rimurapa can grow up to 10 metres long.
- Rimurapa is ideal for making containers. It is tough and flexible like leather, waterproof and airtight like plastic, and strong and stretchy like rubber.
- Māori traditionally used rimurapa for lots of things: as containers to hold fish and shellfish while they were being cooked; as sinkers and floats for fishing lines; as sandals; and even as inflatable life jackets!
- The importance of rimurapa to southern Māori is recognised in law by the Ngāi Tahu Claims Settlement Act 1998. This Act protects rimurapa from commercial harvesting within the tribe's area.



Making the pōhā

When Tiny's whānau get home, first they open each piece of rimurapa by pushing a hand down through the middle and shaping the kelp with their fingers (1). Then they blow up each piece with air so that it becomes a bag. They tie the bags' mouths tightly closed with flax (2). At this stage, the rimurapa looks like big, long, brown balloons. Finally, Tiny and his family hang the bags in the sun until they have dried out completely and gone hard (3).



Next, they lay the dry bags on cloth and under canvas and place them under the house. In a few days, the bags soften until they feel like leather. They are strong like leather, too. The family pack the bags, kete, and tōtara bark onto a boat, and they take them to their tītī island.



Packing the pōhā

The harvested tītī chicks used to be cooked before they were packed into pōhā. These days, they are salted and put into big wooden barrels for four or five days. Then they are packed into the pōhā. Tiny and his family make sure that there are no sharp bones sticking out of the birds because these could make holes in the rimurapa bags.



After they have tied the mouth of each bag with flax, they place it into a kete. They put a bit of tōtara bark in the bottom for a cushion.

Then they cover the rimurapa with tōtara bark. They tie the bark all around with flax to hold it tightly in place. This way of tying the bags is called **tāhere**, or **tā** for short. The finished product is called a pōhā-tītī.

A pōhā usually holds anywhere between seven and thirty-five birds. In the old days, some pōhā were so big that they could hold over three hundred tītī! If a pōhā is stored in the right place – somewhere cool but not damp – the tītī will be good to eat for about two years.





He Taonga

The Tītī Islands and pōhā are taonga handed down to southern Māori from their tīpuna. These things are so special to the community that the **wharekai** at Te Rau Aroha Marae in Bluff has model pōhā and paintings of tītī on its walls. If you are lucky enough to visit this marae, you might see people making pōhā, and you might even get to eat tītī!

Glossary of te reo Māori

harakeke: New Zealand flax

Kāi Tahu (or Ngāi Tahu): the Māori tribe that has customary authority over most of the South Island

kaumātua: respected elder

tāhere: to tie up

tāua: grandmother

tīpuna: ancestors

wharekai: dining room

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Published 2014 by the Ministry of Education
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6011, New Zealand.
www.education.govt.nz

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Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 0 478 44382 0 (online)

Publishing services Lift Education E Tū
Series Editor: David Chadwick
Designer: Jodi Wicksteed/Bolster Design
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Emeli Sione and Hōne Apanui



[New Zealand Government](http://www.govt.nz)

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SCHOOL JOURNAL

September 2014

Do New Zealand Curriculum
LEVEL
2



SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 2, SEPTEMBER 2014

Curriculum learning area	Social Sciences Science
Reading year level	Year 4
Keywords	food, storage, preserving, kelp, tītī, mutton bird, pōhā, harakeke