

# Moa hunter site

## Jargon hunter

Middens are ancient 'refuse heaps'. Early Māori middens generally contain bones, shells and even tools such as adzes. These are an obvious indicator of Māori occupation.

## Digging deeper...

The richest moa hunter site in the southern part of New Zealand is at the Shag River mouth in North Otago. Careful surveying of this site suggests the midden once occupied around 15,000 cubic metres. That is one large moa graveyard!

Archaeologists call the first New Zealanders 'moa hunters'. Moa was on the menu rather regularly for these early Māori settlers, from when they arrived on our shores between 500 and 1000AD until around 1500AD, when the moa were pretty well extinct.

How do we know? Moa hunter camp sites have been found throughout New Zealand, including many on the Otago coast. You can even visit one just north of Papatowai, in the Catlins. A pleasant walk, around 40 minutes return, takes you to a moa hunter camp situated at the mouth of the Tahakopa River. Most moa hunter sites throughout New Zealand are situated on the coast, usually near a river mouth.

While the moa were predominantly hunted for food, their bones were also used for ornaments and tools, such as fish hooks. The shells of moa eggs were also included in ceremonial burials.

Studies of moa hunter site middens in Otago show a progression from mainly moa and seal bones at the bottom to predominantly fish and shellfish remains at the top. This indicates that when the moa hunters first arrived there were plenty of moa to eat. As the years went by moa became scarce and other sources of food were found to take their place. The prevalence of bones from dogs and many bird species show that these were also regularly on the menu.



Moa: *Dinornis giganteus*



David Teviotdale of the Otago Museum excavating a moa hunter site in 1937

