

# The Parrots

ORDER Psittaciformes

This order contains about 376 species in 84 genera that are found in most tropical and subtropical regions. The order is subdivided into three superfamilies: the Strigopoidea (New Zealand parrots); the cockatoos (Cacatuoidea); and the Psittacoidea or 'true' parrots. New Zealand parrots are among the few that inhabit temperate regions. Characteristic features of parrots include a strong, curved bill, an upright stance, strong legs and clawed, zygodactyl feet (i.e. with two toes pointing forward and two, backward).

**Kakapo.** A female called 'Hoki' (born 1992) near the summit of Codfish Island/Whenuahou. The bulk of the world population is now on this island. 29 JAN 2013.



# The New Zealand Parrots

SUPERFAMILY Strigipoidea

## Kakapo *Strigops habroptilus*

Kākāpō

Night Parrot

Critically endangered

New Zealand's famous, giant, nocturnal and flightless parrot is a remarkable but extremely endangered species, its status exacerbated by the birds having a bizarre, lek-breeding system and the fact that it breeds, on average, less than once in 4 years.

### IDENTIFICATION

An extremely large, rotund parrot. **Adult** upper-parts yellowish moss-green; feathers barred or mottled with black or dark brownish grey; tail feathers pointed and quickly become worn. Breast and flanks yellowish green streaked with yellow; belly, undertail, neck and face predominantly

▼ A young (born 1998) male Kakapo, 'Sinbad'. This bird is from Fiordland and Stewart Island/Rakiura parents and as such is yellower than some pure Stewart Island birds. Note the rictal bristles around the face and the prominent nostrils. CODFISH ISLAND/WHENUAHOU; 28 JAN 2013.



yellowish, streaked with pale green and weakly mottled with brownish grey. Conspicuous facial disc of fine feathers, so face resembles that of an owl. Bill mostly cream, with culmen base bluish grey; delicate vibrissae surround bill. Iris dark brown; feet large, blackish grey. Compared to **males, females** with narrower, less domed head; beak narrower and proportionally longer; cere and nostrils smaller; legs and feet more slender and more pinkish grey; tail proportionally longer. Females in the wild may be less yellow and show less plumage mottling,<sup>238</sup> but examination of museum skins does not confirm this.

### VOCALISATIONS

Makes various hoarse *skraark* and hiss calls, but most extraordinary call is low-frequency boom made by males (by inflating an air sac) at a lek in evening. Boom travels over several kilometres and is accompanied by a hoarse *ching* made at intervals throughout the evening.



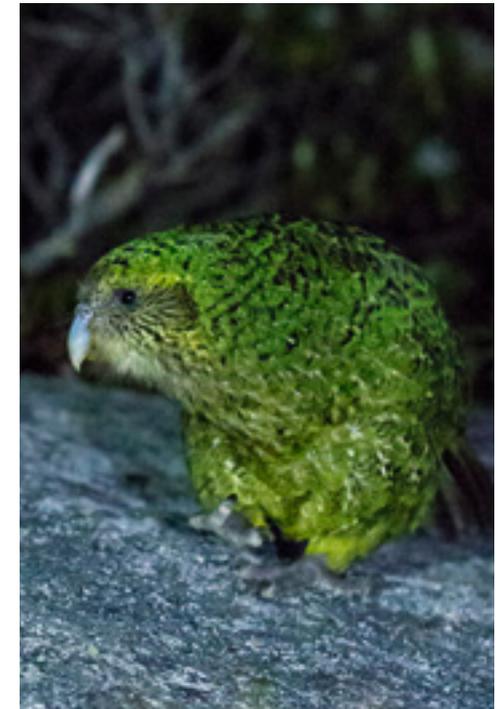
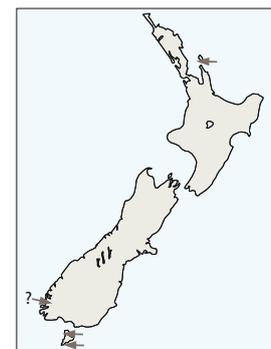
▲ The back and tail of Sinbad showing the contrast between the green coverts and back and the yellow rectrices and remiges. CODFISH ISLAND/WHENUAHOU; 28 JAN 2013.

### SEPARATION FROM SIMILAR SPECIES

Unique and unmistakable.

### DISTRIBUTION

**Endemic** but now extinct in the wild; semi-captive population of c. 130 birds on Codfish and Anchor Islands off Stewart Island/Rakiura. Formerly widespread at all altitudes throughout the North, South and Stewart Islands. Recently reintroduced to Hauturu/Little Barrier Island in the Hauraki Gulf.



▲ The female Hoki approaching the track and bowl systems on top of Codfish Island/Whenuahou in the moonlight. As a pure Stewart Island/Rakiura bird this individual is greener than those with Fiordland ancestry. 30 JAN 2013.

### BREEDING BIOLOGY

Has a lek-breeding system; in any one location, seems to breed (on average) less than once every 4 years, probably related to fruiting of podocarp trees. Nest a platform made of available materials. Site in a natural cavity, generally below ground level. Female lays 1-4 ovate, white eggs, between late Jan and mid-March. Only female incubates the eggs, for about 25-30 days. Chicks semi-altricial, nidicolous; fed solely by female and fledge after 10-12 weeks.<sup>239</sup>

### BIOMETRICS

**TL** 58-64 cm; **WS** 84-91 cm; **W** 257-290 mm; **TA** 43.4-58.4 mm; **WGT** ♂ 2 kg, ♀ 1.5 kg.<sup>239</sup>

### TAXONOMIC NOTES

**Māori name** Kākā refers to the parrot of that name (a name that is undoubtedly onomatopoeic) and pō means 'night'. **English name** While Night Parrot is evocative, it is not unique to this species (Australia has one too). English does not have macrons so, strictly speaking, to correctly transliterate this



▲ A kakapo chick approaching fledging – note the wisps of grey down, grey face and dark ear. CODFISH ISLAND/WHENUAHOU; APRIL 2009.

## New Zealand Kaka *Nestor meridionalis*

Kākā

Threatened

Once the ubiquitous large parrot of the New Zealand forest, this noisy, colourful bird is now rare and confined to remote forested areas, some managed areas (such as mainland islands and fenced sanctuaries) and offshore islands. There are two subspecies, one on the North Island and its offshore islands and the other on the South Island and Stewart Island/Rakiura.

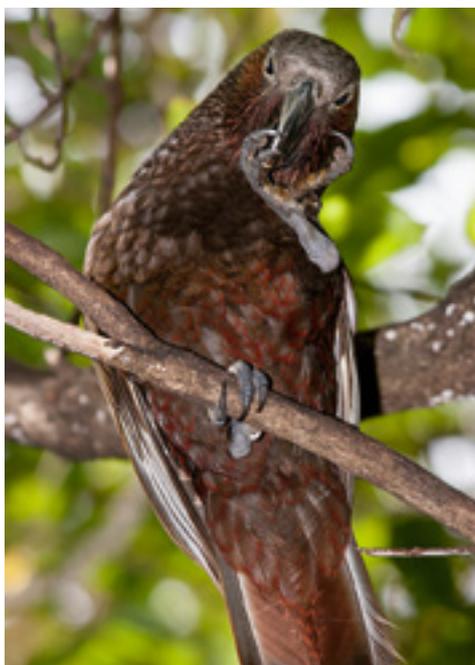
### IDENTIFICATION

A medium-sized, stocky parrot with a prominent, curved beak. **Adults** of both subspecies mostly a deep bronze-brown, with body more rufous and upperwings less bronze. Forehead and crown greyish white (most prominent in the South Island subspecies); nape greyish brown; ear coverts yellow-brown; lores and throat frequently washed pink. Underwing coverts prominent, maroon and extend on to thighs and rump. Bill (including cere) and feet greyish cream; iris brown, eye ring grey. **Juveniles** paler than adults due to pale edges of fresh feathers but are best distinguished by prominent yellow cere and eye ring (fades to adult grey over first 2 years).

### VOCALISATIONS

Call a distinctive *kaa-aaa* given in flight or while perched. Also makes a huge range of yodelling whistles.

name it should be kaakaapoo. **Scientific name and taxonomy** Both the generic and specific name were bestowed by George R. Gray in his 1845 *Genera of Birds*.<sup>71</sup> The generic name is from the Ancient Greek στροίξ, meaning 'owl', and ὄψ, 'face'. The specific name is also Ancient Greek, from ἀβρός, which means 'delicate', and πτίλον, which originally meant 'down feathers' but has later come to mean all feathers. It is presumed that it refers to the soft plumage of this flightless species. Although a separate North Island subspecies (*innominatus*) was described by Mathews and Iredale,<sup>240</sup> it is not recognised.



▲ An adult North Island kaka feeding on a weta it pulled from a rotten branch. HAUTURU/LITTLE BARRIER ISLAND; 26 SEPT 2005.

### SEPARATION FROM SIMILAR SPECIES

With bad views and when bird is silent, could be mistaken for Kea. Readily distinguished by calls and by brown (not green) plumage. Kea lack pale forehead of Kaka; Kaka underwing less striking (dark red in Kaka, brilliant day-glow orange in Kea (see photograph, facing page 1)).

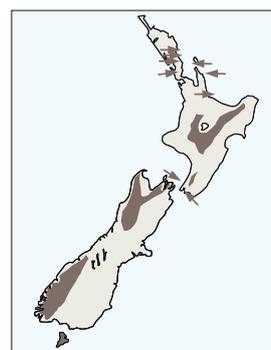
### DISTRIBUTION

**Endemic.** Increasingly rare; greatly reduced across



▲ An adult South Island kaka foraging on tree daisy (*Olearia*) buds. ULVA ISLAND, STEWART ISLAND/RAKIURA; 17 NOV 2010.

its traditional range as a result of habitat loss; predation by introduced predators like rats, possums and stoats; and probably competition from wasps and bees for the honeydew excreted by scale insects, which it eats. Restricted to lowland and mid-altitude native forest. Current strongholds: offshore reserves of Kapiti Island, Codfish Island/Whenuahou and Hauturu/Little Barrier Island as well as Stewart Island/Rakiura and Fiordland. Has successfully bred in the fenced sanctuary at Zealandia™ (formerly Karori Wildlife Sanctuary), so commonly seen in Wellington suburbs. Similarly, many birds from Little Barrier spend winter months in North Auckland. Successful breeding requires predator-free environment.



### BREEDING BIOLOGY

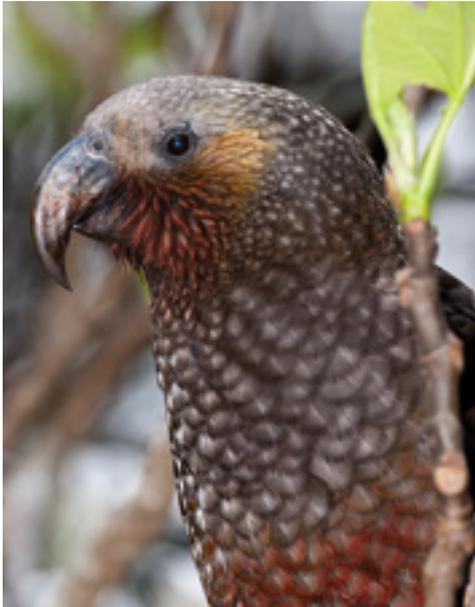
Nest simply a scrape in substrate, in hollow trees. Female lays 3–5 eggs in Sept–March (South Island) and Nov–Dec (North Island). Only female incubates the eggs, for about 3 weeks. Both parents assist in feeding chicks; fledging takes 69–81 days. In a good fruiting year, pairs can have 2 clutches, often using same nest hole. Pairs seldom raise more than 3 chicks in any one clutch.<sup>239</sup>

### BIOMETRICS

**South Island** TL 40–44 cm; **WS** 80–86 cm; **W** 283–311 mm; **TA** 33.4–41.5 mm; **WGT** ♂ 525 g, ♀ 490 g; **North Island** TL 38–42 cm; **WS** 72–80 cm; **W** 256–285 mm; **TA** 33.2–38.4 mm; **WGT** ♂ 450 g, ♀ 400 g.<sup>239</sup>

### TAXONOMIC NOTES

**Māori name** It is a lovely onomatopoeic name. **English name** No other good English name has ever been proposed and why should one have been? English does not have macrons so, strictly speaking, to correctly transliterate this name it should be kaakaa. The two subspecies are based on morphological and behavioural characteristics but recent molecular analyses using nuclear allozyme and microsatellite loci show very little



▲ An adult North Island kaka showing the dark crown of the northern subspecies. HAUTURU/LITTLE BARRIER ISLAND; 21 SEPT 2010.

genetic differentiation between them. We prefer to maintain the two subspecies given the significant size differences described. **Scientific name and taxonomy** The generic name was proposed by René Lesson in the 1830 volume of his *Traité*<sup>168</sup> based on Johns Latham's 1790 usage of *Psitticus nestor* in his *Index*.<sup>51</sup> In Greek mythology, Νέστωρ Γεγήνηος was the wise, grey-headed king of Pylos. It is believed that Latham's use of the name referred to the grey-headedness of the Kaka and not the wisdom of the genus. In fact, recent work has shown that Kea is

## Kea *Nestor notabilis*

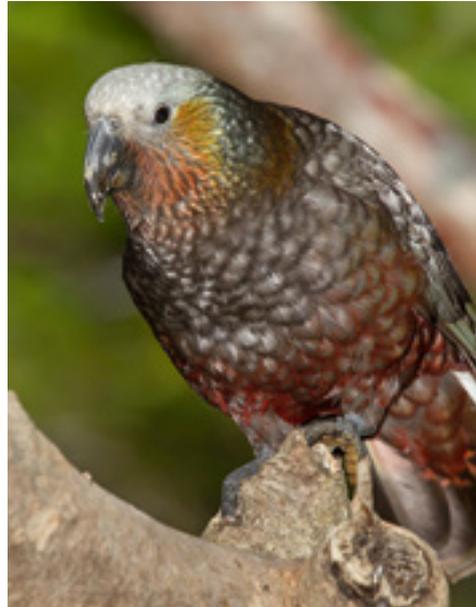
Kea

**Threatened**

This is the playful, intelligent mountain parrot familiar to all who have skied in the South Island and to tourists who have parked their cars in alpine car parks and then had Kea damage them.

### IDENTIFICATION

**Adult** a medium-sized, stocky parrot with a long,



▲ An adult South Island kaka showing the conspicuous pale crown of the southern subspecies. ULVA ISLAND, STEWART ISLAND/RAKIURA; 17 NOV 2010.

among the smartest of all birds. The specific name was bestowed by Johann Gmelin in his 1788 volume of his *Systema Naturae*<sup>38</sup> and is simply Medieval Latin for 'southern'. *Meridionalis* is also the subspecies epithet for the South Island subspecies. The North Island subspecies was described by Lorenz in 1896.<sup>241</sup> The name *septentrionalis* simply means 'northern' in Medieval Latin (which in turn comes from the phrase *septem triones*, meaning 'seven plough oxen', indicating the seven stars of Ursa Major or Minor).

narrow, curved bill and predominantly olive-green plumage and striking, day-glow orange underwing coverts; inner webs of primaries light blue. Tail short, broad; uppertail emerald green with a smudgy brown end that is tipped yellow when fresh; undersides of inner tail feathers with yellow-orange, transverse stripes. Ear coverts dark olive-brown; iris dark brown; bill (including cere), eye ring and legs and feet steel grey. **Male** about 5% larger than **female**, but otherwise similar. **Juvenile** resembles adults, but eye ring and cere yellow, and mandible and legs orange-yellow that becomes grey over about 2 years.



▲ An adult with a dark cere and dark cap. HOMER TUNNEL, SOUTHLAND; 8 NOV 2011.

### VOCALISATIONS

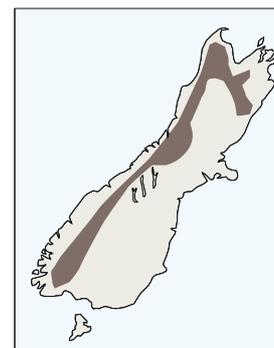
Call a distinctive *kee-ahh* and associated screeches. Makes none of the yodelling calls so distinct in Kaka.

### SEPARATION FROM SIMILAR SPECIES

Could be confused only with Kaka but readily distinguished by calls and by Kea's green (not brown) plumage. Kea lack pale forehead of Kaka; Kaka underwing less striking (dark red in Kaka, brilliant day-glow orange in Kea).

### DISTRIBUTION

**Endemic** to the South Island high country from Fiordland to Nelson and Marlborough. Breeds almost exclusively above 760 m a.s.l., coming down to the West Coast only after heavy snow.



▲ An immature showing a pale centre of the cere but having lost the pale crown. HOMER TUNNEL, SOUTHLAND; 8 NOV 2011.

▼ A juvenile playing with a car tyre. Kea are cheeky, tame birds that frequently get into trouble. EGLINTON VALLEY, SOUTHLAND; 25 FEB 2009.





▲ A juvenile showing the spectacular scarlet and yellow underwings of adults and juveniles. HOMER TUNNEL, SOUTHLAND. 3 FEB 2013.

▶ A juvenile with a yellow cere, lower mandible and eye ring typical of this age. HOMER TUNNEL, SOUTHLAND; 27 JAN 2007.

#### BREEDING BIOLOGY

Nest sites usually on the ground underneath large beech trees, in rock crevices or dug burrows between roots. Nests accessed by 1–6-m long tunnels leading into a larger chamber lined with lichens, moss, ferns and rotting wood. Female lays 2–5 ovate, white eggs, in July–Jan. Only female incubates the eggs, for around 21 days. Fledging period 94 days. May be polygynous but this is disputed.<sup>242</sup>

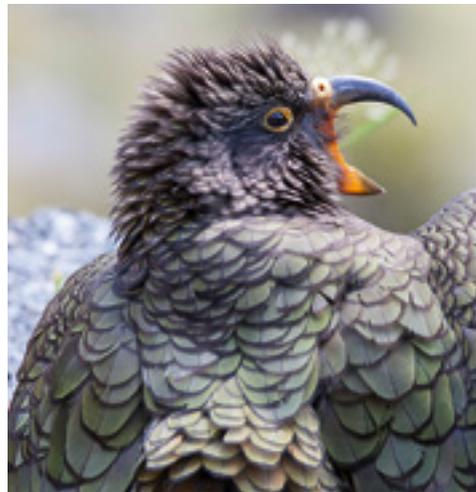
#### BIOMETRICS

**TL** 46–50 cm; **WS** 86–88 cm; **W** 314–331 mm;  
**TA** 41.6–51.2 mm; **WGT** ♂ 960 g, ♀ 780 g.<sup>239</sup>

#### TAXONOMIC NOTES

**Māori name** It is undoubtedly onomatopoeic.

**English name** No other good English name has ever proposed, and why should one have been? **Scientific**



**name and taxonomy** The specific name was bestowed by John Gould in 1856<sup>243</sup> and is Classical Latin for 'noteworthy, conspicuous, extraordinary, memorable, notable' – all of which are appropriate. No variation has been noted. Palaeontological evidence shows the species once occurred in the North Island.<sup>244</sup>

## The Cockatoos

SUPERFAMILY *Cacatuoidea*

### Sulphur-crested Cockatoo

*Cacatua galerita*

Localised introduction

### Galah *Eolophus roseicapillus*

Localised introduction

These two, highly familiar Australian cage birds have in recent years established small populations in isolated parts of the North Island and, in the case of the Sulphur-crested cockatoo, around Banks Peninsula. It is believed that both species are feral but there is no proof and it is equally possible that some if not all these represent natural self-introductions.

#### IDENTIFICATION

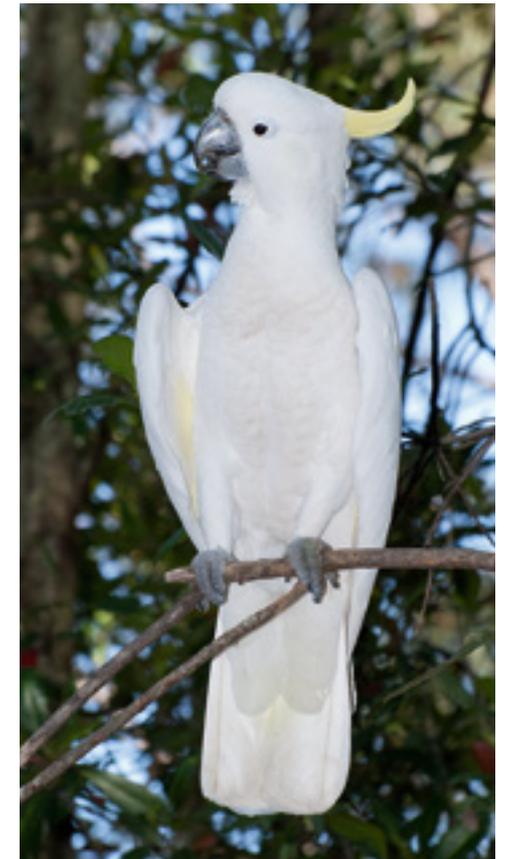
**Sulphur-crested cockatoo** a large, noisy, entirely brilliant white parrot except for striking, sulphur yellow crest (raised during social interactions) and wash of sulphur yellow on undertail and behind ear. Bill steel grey; iris black; legs and feet pale grey. **Juvenile** and **immature** best recognised by smaller crest, and pale cere and legs and feet. **Galah** a stocky, medium-sized parrot with slate grey wings, flight feathers, back and uppertail; breast, face, neck and underwing coverts apricot pink; undertail black. Crown, crest and lores white. Eye ring orange in adult **males**, dirty apricot in **females**. **Juvenile** and **immature** best recognised by smaller crest and pale pink eye ring.

#### VOCALISATIONS

Both species extremely vocal. Cockatoo makes harsh, raucous *screech* and *squawk*, and a yodelling whistle, as well as various croaks, barks and rasps. Galah's commonest call a disyllabic *Chet* and a polysyllabic *a-choo-choo-choo* (up to 12 syllables); also makes a screeching call accompanied by raising of crest.

#### SEPARATION FROM SIMILAR SPECIES

Neither could be mistaken for any other New Zealand bird.



▲ An adult Sulphur-crested cockatoo. Note the yellow wash on the wings and tail. KU-RIN-GAI CHASE NATIONAL PARK, NEW SOUTH WALES; 12 SEPT 2009; SIMON FORDHAM.

#### DISTRIBUTION

Probably **introduced** cage escapees. Sulphur-crested cockatoo with established populations in the Raglan area, in the Turakina Valley near Wanganui and on Banks Peninsula; stragglers may be seen in nearby districts. Possibly genuine vagrants have been reported from Northland and the West Coast. Galah found only south of Auckland and flocks have been reported at Bombay and Clevedon, on Ponui Island and at Mangatawhiri. Sulphur-crested cockatoo found in eastern and northern Australia and on New Guinea; Galah found throughout