

KERERU OR KUKU—N.Z. PIGEON

Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae

AT one time exceedingly abundant, the pigeon has suffered much at the hands of vermin and shooter. Even now it shows so little fear of man that it may be closely approached. It will learn no caution, and ever presents its fair white breast as an irresistible target to anyone with a gun. Luckily no species responds more readily to protection and, with the abolition of guns on forestry and scenic reserves, the pigeon is bound to increase. It is one of the finest pigeons in the world as regards size, beauty of plumage, and strength of flight. The fact that it can fly considerable distances in search of berries helps the bird to survive when the crop in any one district happens to fail. In spring and early summer it is often very lean, but, as the autumn advances and the favourite berries ripen, it rapidly improves in appearance. Of our forest plants, some sixty-five per cent. have succulent fruits attractive to birds, and naturally depend on the birds to distribute their seed. Of all the species so engaged the pigeon is undoubtedly the most important, not only on account of its voracious appetite and varied tastes, but also in virtue of its size, which enables it to swallow the largest fruits. Konini, poroporo, puriri, mangeao, makomako, tawa, matai, miro, kahikatea, titoki, maire, hinau, porokaiwhiri, and karaka are among the fruits eaten. When berries are scarce leaves are not despised, among those eaten being coprosma, kaiku, ribbonwood, and makomako, but kowhai is the favourite. Often through lack of food in the higher altitudes the pigeons, in August, are forced down to the lower country where they feed on the young shoots of the kowhai. When not engaged in filling its crop, the pigeon usually reposes on a thick limb with tail drooping and half spread, the wings closely folded, and the head drawn in; but when alarmed it stretches up its lustrous neck and gently sways its head, uttering its note "Ku, ku."

The pigeon is an inartistic nest builder. Nevertheless such care is taken in the making of the apparently flimsy structure, that it is very secure and rarely blown down. A favourite position is in the branches of a large shrub

overhanging a steep cliff or embankment. Sometimes it is perched on the stouter branches of a larger tree or in the cradle made by a jumble of vines. It is merely a platform of dry twigs and small sticks, cunningly interlaced so that no binding is necessary. Often the single white egg may be seen from below. The parents take great care of the young. At first the chick is fed on the milky secretion from the lining of the crop of the adult, but gradually berries are given in a less and less digested form. During feeding the beak of the old bird overlaps that of the nestling as the contents of her crop are transferred with a swaying motion. Although it has no song, the beautiful plumage, tameness and usefulness as a seed distributor make our pigeon one of our most valued birds.

SEED DISPERSAL BY NATIVE BIRDS.

(By L. W. McCaskill.)

THE experiments on seed dispersal by wax eyes carried out at the Christchurch Teachers' Training College were continued last winter. The birds were fed on a table with raised sides from May to September, the food being sugar and water or diluted honey. Each week the droppings were swept up and stored in sand until the feeding period ceased on September 30th. The material was then sown in a box of sterilised soil at the Botanic Gardens, Christchurch. Up to March 31st, 196 seedlings had germinated. The plants identified were as follows:—

Native:

- Coprosma robusta* (karamu).
- Cordyline australis* (Cabbage tree).
- Pittosporum tenuifolium* (kohuhu).

Introduced:

- Cotoneaster serotina*.
- Berberis* spp.
- Asparagus*.
- Lonicera* (Shrubby honeysuckle).