

One can only speculate on what keas did to amuse themselves before Europeans took up the land in the South Island. Today bootlaces, windscreen wipers, tents, precious food packs and vinyl ski-tow seats are just some of our modern trappings that these alpine parrots delight in demolishing.

However, the mischievous tendencies of the kea are almost universally accepted, precisely because they are what endear these 'clowns of the high country' to people. Only in a small section of the farming community are the antics of the kea frowned upon, where some are accused of killing sheep. The stories approach legendary proportions, conjuring visions of countless sheep being herded over cliffs by bloodthirsty keas. Even today, after more than 150,000 keas have been killed by humans, some still insist that uncontrolled kea populations could affect the very livelihood of high country farming operations.

Keas can injure sheep, which may lead to blood poisoning and subsequent death. But it is absurd to contend that a 50cm long bird can kill a sheep, or that it deliberately harrasses mobs over bluffs. Keas have been known to attack sheep immobilised by heavy snow or illness, and they will eat dead carcasses.

Often, however, the reports are either untrue or exaggerated. It is easier to lay the blame at the kea's door and to overlook other problems such as lice, flyblow, dermatitis, injury and old age.

Inoculation against blood poisoning and improved sheep husbandry mean that



"High up in the air he flew, and we caught glimpses of the gorgeous orange feathering on the underside of his wings. As he dipped and circled we marvelled at the flashes of crimson, and of iridescent golden-green and turquoise-blue — colours not usually associated with the sombre moss-green of kea plumage." — from *A Kea On My Bed*, by Molly Falla. Photo: Don Hadden

Only the creation of national parks and the kea's toughness have saved this unique alpine parrot from extinction. Since 1860, it has been estimated that people have killed more than 150,000; today their numbers could be as low as 1000 or as high as 5000. This kea was photographed on Mt Fyfe, above Kaikoura. Photo: Andris Apse

damage or loss due to keas is now insignificant.

Records show that keas were killed as soon as European farmers arrived in the South Island. Between 1860, by which time farming was well established, and 1970, when partial protection was granted, at least 150,000 keas were killed. This has been described as the worst case of avicide in New Zealand's history and one of the worst in the world. G R Marriner writes in his well known book *'The Kea — A New Zealand Problem'* about the numbers of keas that were destroyed. Government involvement with the 'problem' began in 1890 with the introduction of the bounty scheme, which continued until 1971. In 1906 the bounty was worth 6d, this rising to 10 shillings by 1930 — a small fortune in those depression days. In 1935 the division of payment was: Government 3/-; County 2/-; runholder 5/-. Many people used to cross over from Canterbury, which had a bounty scheme, to the West Coast, where they did not have one, in order to hunt keas, and some farmers during the Depression either supplemented their income from schemes or relied on the bounty for income. The most accurate record we have of keas killed during the early part of this century can be found in the *New Zealand Journal of Agriculture*, which shows that 29,249 bounties were paid out between 1920-29!

Many changes have taken place to the kea's habitat and food supply since last century, after the early settlers took fire and axe to the landscape. Sheep and other introduced browsing animals ate much

