

MOHUA

a declining species

by Graeme Elliott, Scientist

Last century yellowheads were one of the most abundant and conspicuous forest birds in the South Island. Smith,¹ an early ornithologist, described an encounter with a flock of yellowheads near Lake Brunner in 1887 as follows:

"On reaching nearly the top of the gully, I heard the shrill, ringing notes of a flock of yellowheads . . . They numbered about two hundred, and were in rich plumage . . . Before the yellowheads had quite disappeared I heard the rich flute-notes of a flock of

saddlebacks advancing . . . Probably no scene in bird life is more attractive or beautiful . . ."

Not only have the saddlebacks disappeared, but sadly flocks of yellowheads are now rare. Whereas yellowheads were once found in all the forests of the South Island and Stewart Island, they now have a much more restricted range. They no longer occur on Stewart Island or in the forest remnants of the Kaikoura Coast, Canterbury and north Otago; they are very rare in Nelson, Marlborough, Buller and north and

central Westland; there is a small low density population in some of the eastern valleys in and around Arthur's Pass National Park; and there are only a few birds in south Westland. Today the stronghold of the yellowhead is west Otago and Fiordland, and in some eastern valleys they occur in high densities. They also survive in some of the isolated forest remnants of south Otago and Southland, notably the Catlins and Blue Mountains.

Cats again

The history of the decline of the yellow-



Male yellowhead outside nest waits his turn to feed chicks inside. The female has just finished feeding and is about to leave.

Photo: Don Hadden



Like most birds, yellowheads are fastidious about keeping their nests clean. Here, a parent removes a fecal sac. Photo: Don Hadden



Female incubating chicks. Long-tailed cuckoos lay their eggs in about 12 percent of nests — only those large enough for them to enter — and the yellowhead then hatches the cuckoo chick which pushes the yellowhead chicks out of the nest. Photo: Don Hadden



Ideal yellowhead habitat: unmodified red and silver beech forest growing on fertile alluvium of the Eglinton Valley floor, Fiordland. Today the Eglinton and a few similar neighbouring valleys support the best remaining yellowhead populations. The future of the Eglinton Valley forests are assured as they are part of Fiordland National Park, but other yellowhead habitats in some state forests are threatened by logging. Photo: Sue Penniket

A male yellowhead carrying food to its nest in a knothole in a large old silver beech tree. It's large old trees such as this one that provide most nest holes and it's also these trees that have the most epiphytic mosses, ferns and lichens amongst which the yellowheads feed. Photo: Don Hadden

Inset: Author Graeme Elliott climbs a lofty red beech tree to check on progress in a yellowhead nest. The nests tend to be located high in trees above 13 m. Photo: Don Hadden