

# KAKAPO

## ARE THE BOOM YEARS OVER?

by Gerard Hutching

*"He is doomed to extinction long before the kiwi and the roa are a thing of the past."* (Charlie Douglas, 1899)

**"J**ust think what it would have been like 100 years ago with all those males booming." Apart from the hoarse cry of a kiwi and the shrill whistle of a weka, silence greeted Wildlife Officer Dick Anderson's words as the gloom gathered over the vast Transit Valley — proof that 1986 was not a good year for kakapo breeding in Fiordland.

Anderson, Park assistant Chris Hughes and I settled in for the evening on a rock almost 1000m above sea level. It was 10 pm; to the west we could just make out the silvery sparkle of the Tasman Sea, while some kilometres away at the head of this inaccessible valley a great waterfall spewed out of a cleft in the rocks below Lake Morton.

Immediately to the left loomed the rock outcrop popularly known as "The Kastle" by those who had come since the mid-1970s to the Transit Valley in search of kakapo, and behind us higher up lay Lake Liz, where we had our base.

This, then, was kakapo country, 1986. A straggling remnant of a once numerous species now occupied this outpost — the only mainland area with perhaps the exception of North-West Nelson where it is still known, although at one time much of New Zealand had belonged to this timid, flightless bird, before humans had crossed its evolutionary path.

It is estimated that perhaps only six of the world's largest parrot remain in Fiordland, all of them probably male. So far none have been sighted in North-West Nelson, but indications are whatever population may live there will be male and ageing.

Only on Stewart and Little Barrier Islands are the kakapo in any numbers — fewer than 50 on Stewart but their 6000-hectare area is threatened by prowling wild cats, and 21 on Little Barrier, none of whom are breeding.

"This is one bird that's in a hell of a lot of trouble," Anderson muttered as, the evening watch over, we made our way back up the 100 metres to base camp.

**T**he beginning of the kakapo's decline is traced back to the arrival of Maoris in Aotearoa and the introduction of the Polynesian dog, kuri, and the rat, kiore (*Rattus exulans*), although Gordon Williams considered its numbers and range had shrunk before humans affected it. Explorer Charlie Douglas observes that "dogs are

very fond of kakapo hunting, not alone for the fun, but because they are good eating."

When Maoris first landed, kakapo would have been everywhere throughout the three main islands, and may have even lived on the Chatham Islands. Dr Phil Millener's studies of cave deposits in the King Country have shown that at one stage the kakapo was a common bird in that region.

The kakapo would have been easy game. The ever quotable Douglas provided this colourful description: "The birds could be heard, coming along snarling and squealing as is their wont. When the Maorie (sic)



Radio-telemetry is used extensively in the battle to save the kakapo, an essential tool for the dense forest and alpine shrubland work carried out by the Wildlife Service. Photo: Gerard Hutching

knew that a bird was close, he suddenly flashed a light with a torch, the bird stopped and glared with amazement and so was easily caught. At other times they could be caught in the moonlight, when on the low scrub, by simply shaking the tree or bush till they tumbled on the ground, something like shaking down apples. I have seen as many as half a dozen kakapos shaken off one tutu bush this way." (*Birds of South Westland* 1899).

By the time Europeans came to New Zealand, the bird's range had contracted considerably, although it lived in parts of the central North Island and was abundant in the Nelson district, on the West Coast and in Fiordland. As late as 1879 it was still

found in the Marlborough Sounds. The introduction of the stoat and ship rat spelled disaster for such vulnerable birds as the kakapo, which, having no knowledge of such predators, also had no defences against them.

During the 1950s to the 1970s, the search for survivors of these catastrophic changes narrowed down to the Milford catchment in Fiordland. However, the exciting discovery of about 200 on Stewart Island in 1977 gave kakapo watchers fresh hope; their optimism suffered a setback, though, as cats have whittled down this number and caused the Wildlife Service to shift some of the population to Little Barrier Island for the species' safety.

Early spring, 1985, the signs had been encouraging, pointing to the possibility of a "booming" year — a reference to the curious breeding behaviour of the kakapo. The male fashions out a bowl high up on a ridge, usually with some natural reflecting surface such as a rock behind. The naturalist Richard Henry describes how the male then develops an air sac which can be puffed out like a balloon or drum. "They start with a couple of short grunts, and they utter five or six deep measured notes like the sound of a muffled drum, the loudest in the middle." Recent field research has shown that the female is then attracted through this booming to the mating arena — the kakapo is the only New Zealand bird, as well as the only parrot and flightless bird in the world to exhibit such "lek" behaviour.

Booming years to kakapo watchers are like the rut to the deer-stalker — the time when the animal makes itself most obvious. Because kakapo are essentially shy, secretive birds (and nocturnal, as the "Collector" Andreas Reischek lyrically observed: "they leave their burrows after

*Opposite: The "Kastle", on top of which male kakapo have been observed booming to the valley below. Unfortunately, no females have recently answered the call, which can be heard some kilometres away. Photo: Gerard Hutching*

*Inset top: Light-intensifying 'scopes have allowed scientists to observe kakapo by night, and see for the first time the curious phenomenon of "booming" — the means by which the male attracts a mate. Photo: Rod Morris*

*Inset bottom: One of the few remaining kakapo known to exist in Fiordland held by Principal Wildlife Officer Dick Anderson. The bird's moss-green colouring provides some defence against predators, but its strong scent and "freeze" posture has made it easy game. Photo: Gerard Hutching*