

# CRUNCH TIME FOR WEST COAST RAINFORESTS

*The Government has declared that it wants to resolve the thorny issue of West Coast forests "once and for all" by the end of this year. The Joint Campaign on Native Forests, of which the Society is a member, is also keen that decisions on "nature's last great stronghold in New Zealand" are made as soon as possible — providing of course they are favourable for conservation. Here Society West Coast conservation officer, Kevin Smith, presents the case for why a network of reserves and wildlife corridors is vital for nature on the Coast.*

**I**n the beech forests of Tawhai State Forest on the West Coast, the pre-dawn darkness rings with the quavering whistle of the kaka. At daybreak, these large forest parrots often flock together above the forest canopy in small cacophonous family groups. Their musical whistling gives way to harsh, grating calls before they settle down and commence food-gathering for the day, tearing open the decaying limbs of ageing forest trees in search of beetle larvae rich in nutritious fats.

Lying in the heart of North Westland's beech forests, Tawhai is one of the best places in New Zealand to see this impressive bird. For kaka, despite their robust appearance, have very specialised habitat requirements. Few birds are seen outside the handful of large continuous tracts of unmodified lowland forest remaining in this country. Kaka are totally dependent on the large diameter podocarp and beech trees of the forest for food and nesting holes. These trees however, are also keenly sought by sawmillers.

Nowadays kaka are in high concentrations in only a limited part of North Westland, namely the low to mid altitude forests of the Reefton and Inangahua hill country. Sadly, the region's present reserve system cannot ensure the survival of kaka in one of its national strongholds. The bulk of the existing Big River Ecological Area in Tawhai forest lies above 600 metres, the normal upper altitudinal range of kaka. Lower down, the podocarp/beech forests of its preferred habitat are zoned for logging. They are currently sought for reservation by

Wildlife scientists and conservationists. Because kaka range widely and only occur in relatively low numbers, large reserves of optimal habitat are essential to secure their survival. The future of kaka, other declining forest wildlife and irreplaceable forest ecosystems in North Westland and Buller will be determined shortly.

## Legendary names

Government is about to take important decisions on the future of West Coast forests. Conservationists have been fighting to save these forests for a decade and more. Some of them have been household names for much of this time: Oparara, Paparoa and Maruia are legendary names that instantly evoke images of pristine landscapes, tall forests rich with bird song and unrivalled scenic splendour. Other forests have achieved national prominence only recently as logging roads bored into their hearts. These include Harata, Ahaura Gorge, Doctor Hill and the North Westland wildlife corridor forests.

Thousands of people have been involved in the conservation campaigns for these forests. Innumerable letters and submissions have been written, hundreds of field trips and public meetings held, and scores of politicians introduced to their beauty and ecological wonders. Despite this outpouring of concern, few of the key areas have been legally protected. Some of the finest natural landscapes and ecologically valuable forests remain at risk.

However, enormous shifts in public and official perceptions of these forests have

**The inquisitive South Island robin strongly prefers beech forested valley floor habitats, which would be greatly affected by the planned extensive logging of the beech forests.** Photo: Terry Fitzgibbon



**The Mesozoic rainforests of ancient Gondwanaland survive in New Zealand's beech and podocarp rainforests. Tall-standing trees like this 300-year-old North Westland red beech tree are part of our natural heritage, hosting many birds, insects and perching plants. They deserve protection, not consignment to the woodchip pile.** Photo: Craig Potton

