



The spectacular view from the heights of "kakapo castle", looking down into George Sound. Photo: B. Miles

ranging area. The whole of the 50 metre "garden path" was notably clean and tidy with closely cropped and sharply defined edges. On average it was 5cm deep and 35cm wide. Along the verges there were five bowl-shaped areas, 45-60cms wide and 12-15cms deep. Three of the bowls appeared to have been used recently and one of these had a *Dacrydium* root at the back of it which had been nibbled at from below.

On the west side of the pathway, tunnels led off into the stunted *Dacrydium* to drop steeply down the hillside to a tiny tarn perched on a rock ledge 100 metres below. Descending to this tarn we were excited to find a mass of typically rolled kakapo grass chews around its edge. We also found a characteristically coiled grass dropping of a kakapo. On the north side of the tarn we found another track and bowl system encompassing a rock outcrop which offered both shelter and potential nesting sites. The whole rock ledge with its tiny tarn was poised on the brink of a great overhang rendering it safe from any approach to Kakapo Castle from the valley below – a perfect retreat for a beleaguered bird.

A night vigil was kept within the precincts of Kakapo Castle but no kakapo were seen or heard.

In February 1989 I returned to the scene of our former find with another companion, Bruce Miles. The kakapo had been booming on Stewart Island that month but none had been heard or seen in the Milford Sound area by Don Merton and his party who preceded our expedition. On 13 February we camped on the summit slopes of Saddle Hill within half a kilometre of Kakapo Castle, but no booms were heard. The next day we carried on down the main south ridge. As we approached Kakapo Castle I was delighted to see that the kakapo pathway was still obvious after 30 long years. But its whole neat and tidy character had changed. The edges were no longer closely trimmed and cropped and had become overgrown with grass and shrubs. All five bowls had become completely overgrown and could no longer be distinguished. As a track and bowl system for kakapo to boom and display it had obviously become disused. The tunnels leading off through the *Dacrydium* were still present, however (probably because of the slow rate of growth of this shrub) and I descended to the tarn on the rock ledge below. But there too the display bowls had disappeared and there was no sign of any kakapo chews or droppings.

Reluctantly I concluded that Kakapo Castle at George Sound, one of the last retreats of the kakapo in Fiordland, had become deserted. This sad fact emphasises the importance of the transfers of the cat-plagued kakapo colony of Stewart Island to Little Barrier Island and Codfish Island. These two bird sanctuaries would seem to offer the last hope for these "old New Zealanders" as Richard Henry once called them. 🦜



Sketch of kakapo tracks at George Sound by John Buchan in 1863. (From *Fiordland Explored* by John Hall-Jones).

as the track and bowl system discovered in 1956.

In 1949 members of the combined New Zealand-American expedition to Caswell Sound "encountered" two kakapo to the west of Saddle Hill which prompted the author and three companions, Brian Reid (later of DoC), Alistair Carey and the late Tom Couzens to plan an expedition into this area in search of kakapo. Near our base camp at the foot of Saddle Hill we discovered some comparatively fresh bird bones which were subsequently confirmed by Ron Scarlett of the Canterbury Museum to be those of a kakapo.

On 17 February 1956 Alistair Carey and I ascended the main south ridge of Saddle Hill,

an impressive, steeply walled mountain (3,971 feet) protected on all flanks by typical Fiordland bluffs. An ideal retreat, a "Kakapo Castle", if ever there was one. Nearing the summit (at about 3,300 feet) the whole character of the ill-defined ridge track that we were following changed abruptly to that of a wider, well kept garden path. This pathway extended for about 50 metres before reverting to a scarcely definable track. The pathway linked two knolls, each of which offered extensive panoramic views over the whole of George Sound to the north and the main Stillwater Valley of Caswell Sound to the south. As such the system was superbly sited to project boom calls in either direction over a wide