



# Kea

## Creature of curiosity

by Kerry-Jayne Wilson

**T**HE KEA is one of our most notorious birds. Loved by some, disliked by others, no-one is indifferent to this raucous clown of the mountains. By 1880 its intense curiosity had led this predominantly vegetarian parrot astray, and it was reputed to be a sheep killer. The truth of this has never been satisfactorily resolved, but reports are certainly much exaggerated.

Today keas' curiosity still leads them into trouble whenever people enter their alpine domain. Modern cars with their exterior gadgetry, anything rubber or polystyrene, tents, packs, boots and food can prove irresistible to kea whose strong, manipulative bill and feet can be used to human disadvantage.

### Little Known

But these all too frequent encounters with kea give a false impression of their abundance and behaviour. Away from alpine villages, skifields, huts and carparks kea are not often encountered; in fact, for a species with such a high profile, surprisingly

little is known about them. In 1986 I began to study what kea do when they are not around people. Since then, with the help of assistants, we have colour-banded 91 kea at Mount Cook National Park and, using radio-packages especially designed by SIRTRACK Electronics, radio-tagged eight of these. We have also banded over 120 other kea, at Arthur's Pass and Westland National Parks and Craigieburn Forest Park.

In this article I will describe my findings on kea breeding, social habits, habitat and movements. The study will continue for at least two more years. Much is still to be discovered, and the views presented here are only preliminary. A graduate student, Ria Brejaart, has been studying the foods of kea and what they do at skifields and villages. Her work was assisted by a grant from Forest and Bird, and she will report on it in a subsequent article.

New Zealand has some unusual parrots; the giant lek-breeding kakapo, sub-antarctic parakeets and the kea, the world's only

Part of Mt Cook National Park showing the locations at which three breeding male kea (Geoffrey, Charles and Baldrick), and two presumed non-breeders (Cedric and David), have been seen or located by radio fixes. Circled are core areas which contain 70-90 percent of radio fixes.

