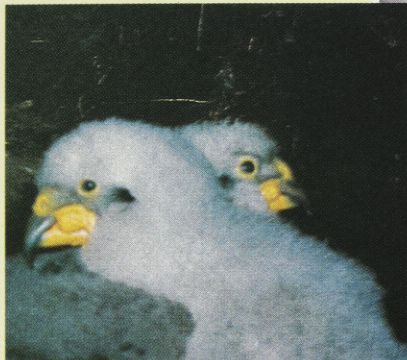


*One of the few kea nests observed in recent times is this one in a large hollow rata tree in Arthur's Pass National Park. The chicks (inset) are visited only by the mother. No amount of pleading from hungry chicks will entice the father into the nest to feed them.*

Photo: Kerry Wilson



'alpine' parrot. Kea occur only in the South Island mountains: the Southern Alps as well as most mountain ranges in Westland, Nelson and Marlborough. Although less numerous than they were 120 years ago, their overall distribution has changed little. Most likely they were formerly more evenly distributed through each mountain chain, whereas today their distribution appears to be fragmented.

They are a timberline species by preference, and apparently occur most commonly either side of that ecological boundary. At Mount Cook, Governors Bush, one of the few areas of forest, is a favoured haunt. In my main study area, the Tasman Valley, the taller and thicker the scrub, the more favoured the habitat. The steep valley sides are preferred, and kea spend little time on the valley floors. In the glacier-filled Tasman Valley the reason is obvious, but further down the valley and in the Hooker Valley, kea usually avoid the flat valley floors, even when these are well vegetated. At Craigieburn Forest Park, kea concentrate in the upper levels of the mountain beech forest and the lower slopes of the neighbouring sub-alpine herb fields, but we have seen them from mountain top to valley floor. Huts, villages and dumps readily entice kea down from their favoured haunts.

So far we have found only three nests, two at Mount Cook and one at Arthur's Pass. The Mount Cook nests are approximately 100m and 250m in altitude above the valley floor. Both are beneath prominent landmarks and command superb views of the surrounding mountains. One is in a burrow between buried rocks. The other is beneath a huge rock. In both the nest chamber is at least 1.5m from the entrance, secure from the prying eyes of researchers. The Arthur's Pass nest is in a very different situation – in a hollow rata tree well below the bush line. Both Mount Cook nests have been used by the same pairs for two and probably three years. A previous study by Dick Jackson found that kea laid eggs between July and January. I have observed five clutches of kea eggs. Hatching dates of these eggs and the dates fledglings were first seen at Mount Cook, Arthurs Pass and Craigieburn suggest that most eggs were laid in July or August, but the eggs within a single clutch could have been laid over several weeks.

