

KILLING THE KERERU



BRIAN EATING

In Northland, kereru or native wood pigeon are in trouble. And this time it's not just the ecological problems of predation by stoats and rats, and competition from possums. As ROSS ATKINSON explains, hunters are taking increasing numbers of this dwindling forest icon – and getting away with it.

WOOD PIGEONS are dying.

The weather is calm and clear. On any beautiful still late-autumn morning somewhere in

Northland, pigeons may be dying at the rate of up to twenty a day.

These kereru, or kukupa as they are known in Northland, are not dying naturally. They are being taken by rifle or shotgun. It is happening every year in the majority of Northland's native forests such as Puketi, Waipoua, Warawara, Raetea, and Omahuta.

Fine, clear, and calm conditions are favoured by the kereru's hunters. From dawn to around 10.30 am, the kereru is feeding and at its most active. In the stillness of the morning the wing beats are easily heard as the bird moves about readily in search of miro berries. It then likes to sit in the sun and preen.

In a typical scenario, the hunter has been dropped off by vehicle near his favourite area, just on, or slightly before daylight. He picks his way quietly and carefully along the track, taking particular care not to leave any footprints for at least the first few hundred metres. The hunter is wary of the few wildlife rangers or Department of Conservation officers who are skilful enough to track and catch him.

Within an hour he has arrived at a lonely descending side spur off the main ridge track. The side spur has plenty of miro scattered about. Miro trees that have been painstakingly cleared of undergrowth that would inhibit his shooting. This has been done over successive seasons, with regular trimming every year.

The berries have been ripe for about a month now, and the kereru has had time to build up condition. The miro flavour is succulent throughout its plump body. Ripe for the pot.

By 8 am the hunter has his first bird.

continued over page