



Cultural harvest. The shooting of kereru was a tradition – if for a shorter time – amongst pakeha also. The large, visible and slow-moving birds were taken in huge numbers, as shown in this portrait of a hunting party around the turn of the century in Nelson. The species was not fully protected until 1921.

the naturally low reproductive rate of kereru has been exacerbated by pressure from introduced predators and competitors such as rats, weasels, stoats, ferrets, possums and cats, and that an average of only one in eight nesting attempts today results in successful fledging.

Northland DoC scientist Dr Ray Pierce is convinced that kereru are not breeding fast enough to replace themselves. While the problem is worst in the north, the only area of the country in which populations don't appear to be in decline is in Marlborough.

Pierce is at present carefully duplicating a 1979 Wildlife Service survey by recording bird calls at 120 Northland sites. The census is expected to confirm a sharp drop in kereru numbers over the last decade.

BEFORE THE ARRIVAL of Europeans in New Zealand, the country was predominantly covered with forest, and kereru were abundant. The bird was a traditional and important food source to Maori, who caught it using spears and snares and preserved it in its own fat.

With Europeans came firearms and axes and the beginning of the huge downward trend in kereru populations. Pakeha also saw the bird as an excellent food and there are photographs and stories of hunting parties returning with bags of hundreds of birds.

The felling of the majority of the forest tracts in the country reduced the population to a barely sustainable level. As early as 1864, kereru were the first native birds to be given (partial) protection, and in 1921 the species was fully protected.

In pre-European days it did not matter if a large number of birds were taken from a specific area. The extensive habitat and sizeable populations were such that it was not long before that area was replenished. The iwi of the region attempted to ensure that the species was not over-hunted. They were aware of the need to sustain the food source and the cultural significance of the bird.

Today, however, it is a different story. Those who still take kereru do not use traditional methods. The use of shotguns and, more often, the silenced .22 are common.

Forest and Bird's position

The society's policy on indigenous plants and animals was adopted by the Council in June last year. Among other things it aims to ensure:

- "that all absolutely protected wildlife under the Wildlife Act remains fully protected.
- "that the absolute protection afforded to species under the Wildlife Act is not compromised by the killing of species for cultural, economic or other purposes."

The society's position is in line with that of the International Council for Bird Preservation. ICBP accepts the killing of protected species only where essential for the sustenance of indigenous peoples and where the kill is sustainable.

Shot through the breast with the silenced .22 rifle. He quietly makes his way some metres off the shooting area and carefully plucks every feather from the kereru, even from the head. The feathers are carefully concealed under a log with debris pushed over them, or with ponga fronds laid on top. As the bird is placed in a plastic bread bag inside the pack, another pigeon is heard arriving noisily back up the ridge. And so it goes on.

Just what is being done to protect this endemic bird from continual predation by hunters? It would appear that while it is an absolutely protected species under the Wildlife Act, the poor kereru is afforded very little "absolute protection" at all.

Kereru are naturally slow breeders. They lay only one egg and not necessarily every year. The period from laying the egg to fledging is an unusually long two and a half months. We now know that

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