

# The Kakapo and Its Mysteries

## Interesting Story from 3YA

**P**ROBABLY the most interesting of a series of talks given from 3YA on the native bird-life of New Zealand by Mr. A. F. Donoghue, N.Z. Inst. R.A.O.U., was that dealing with the kakapo. Accompanying is the full text of that lecture.



Opening my series of talks on "Some Quaint New Zealand Birds" two weeks ago with "The takaha and its life story," I stated that of all the quaint and wonderful birds inhabiting the high-land forests and marshy lowlands of this unique country the takaha was pre-eminently the most mysterious and romantic. Well, I will say of the kakapo, it is the most baffling and bewildering. The life it is leading to-day is a veritable contradiction, placing the bird in the position of being the connecting link between the birds of flight and the flightless birds.

The kakapo is our largest parrot, being slightly larger than the kaka or the kea. It is a bird of bulky proportions, with short powerful legs and heavy clawed feet, resembling in stature the heavy, erect set of the owl. Such structural lines would not, as a rule, inspire one with the hope that beauty would lend itself lavishly in the plumage adornment; but, strange to say, the kakapo is arrayed in a most wonderful plumage—the most striking of our native birds, save the small parakeets, and this fact is all the more bewildering when we realise that the bird is nocturnal in its habits.

The predominant shade in the extravagant plumage of the kakapo forms a background of rich moss green, flecked and spangled with gold, relieved on the back and wings with sections of warm brown markings of many tints. At the base of the stubby, powerful bill there is a luxuriant growth of soft hair-like feathers which project forward, half-way along the bill on either side. The wings are in proportion to the size of the body, and a casual observer would undoubtedly conclude that the bird was possessed of reasonable powers of flight; yet it ranks amongst our flightless birds. The large wings have been allowed to fall into such a state of disuse that they are now too weak in the muscles to be of effective service. Even when attacked, or when hurrying off from some enemy, only the slightest effort is made to bring the large useless wings into action.

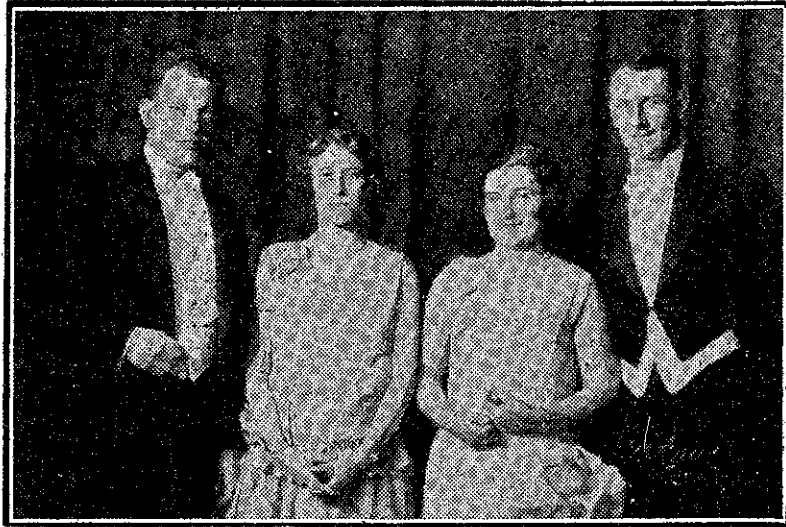
Like the kiwi, the kakapo makes its hiding-place and nesting-place in the ground, amongst the roots of trees and in the deep cavities of rocks, where it conceals itself practically the whole day long, emerging at dusk to feed on berries, seeds, tender leaves, grass, and other vegetable growth. Having secured a good supply of food during the night and early hours of the morning, it treks off to its secluded hiding-place where the daylight hours are spent. Occasionally, however, it ventures out in the daytime, and may sometimes be discovered out in the open, basking in the sunshine. When approached in such situations it rarely makes any serious attempt to escape, but when captured it defends itself most vigorously with beak and claws. Once a captive it soon becomes a great pet, and ere many days have passed its degree of intelligence becomes very pronounced.

On one occasion, when exploring the heights of that rugged majestic cape, located at the mouth of the Waitaha River in mid-Westland, and known

as Bold Head, my party discovered a large male kakapo basking in the warm sand. It was captured after a short encounter, and although it set up a defence it was perfectly tame within half an hour, and began to play with its captors. During the three days it was kept in captivity it was persistently looking for play and excitement.

Though a parrot, I have never known the kakapo to learn to talk. Its intellect seems to work in other

thing of a contradiction in the great scheme of Nature that so brilliant a plumage should be called upon to live almost in perpetual exclusion from the light of day? The case of the kakapo is one of those striking examples of the possibility of extraordinary changes having been wrought in the life history of the bird. The brilliant green plumage of many shades, for instance, immediately suggests that there was a time in the life of the species when its habits were diurnal, when it loved to



THE ARIEL SINGERS OF 2YA. From left to right.—Mr. R. Hill, Miss J. Briggs, Miss N. Coster and Mr. J. M. Caldwell. One of Wellington's most popular combinations.

—S. P. Andrew, photo.

directions; play and amusement is all it asks; it really demands special attention from one whom it makes a friend. Of course, very few birds have been kept in captivity for any length of time—two or three that I know of died within three months of being captured. The nocturnal habits of the kakapo have excluded it, to a great extent, from winning any marked degree of popularity, and for the same reason it is one of the least known of our native birds. The specimens taken have usually been captured by dogs during the night.

The kakapo is known to the back-country settler as the ground parrot; but, being a splendid climber, it frequently finds its way into the tops of shrubs and medium-sized trees. When climbing, much use is made of the powerful bill, a half-right-and-left method being adopted, identical with the climbing tactics of the kaka.

As a rule, birds of nocturnal habits are feathered in dull, unattractive shadings, usually browns and greys; but the kakapo is the one striking exception among the nocturnal birds of New Zealand. Does it not seem some-

bask in the bright glistening sunshine, when that gorgeous plumage rivaled that of all other birds in sending forth a dazzling radiation. Another somewhat convincing aspect, which forces to the conclusion that a wonderful change has taken place, lies in the fact that the shade of the green plumage is in keeping with the predominant shade of the mossy vale in which the bird delights to feed, suggesting a protective colouration. Hence, if this bird were originally destined for nocturnal habits protective colouration in such a marked degree would not have been necessary.

And further, let us examine the feet of the bird. Like all members of the parrot family the kakapo has four toes on each foot, two forward and two behind, and all heavily clawed; it is self-evident that such feet never were planned for walking on the floor of the forest; they are powerful, perching feet, designed to aid the bird in climbing amongst the branches of the lofty forest trees, and in taking a sure, safe hold when flying from tree to tree. The type of foot suited to walking on the ground is that with the spreading toes—three forward and one behind, as

is common in all birds that are at home on the ground. But with the foot of the kakapo there is no spread. Both forward and back toes are close together, giving little assistance to the balance of the body. Obviously such feet were not created for walking and running purposes.

Kakapo is the name given to the bird by the Maori, and means night-parrot. As this name has been handed down through many generations, it would appear that, at least for many centuries past, the bird has been possessed of nocturnal habits; and in all probability such habits were forced upon it through the gradual weakening in its powers of flight.

It is difficult at times to reconcile existing conditions with the scientific theories which proclaim that all flightless birds of to-day were, at one time or other, away back in the ancient times of their ancestors, possessed of full powers of flight. But no such difficulty exists in the case of the kakapo. Here we have a bird feathered in every detail like a bird of flight. The rounded, full-sized tail, the large, well-proportioned wings, the short heavy legs and clawed feet, all tell us that the possessor of such marked features never was created to work out its destiny on the floor of the forest. These outstanding characters immediately force us to the conclusion that the kakapo was at one time a bird of flight, and leave us bewildered at the thought that to-day that power has passed. And why? Is it because this beautiful bird found no charm in opening its wings and floating from tree to tree, and from hilltop to hilltop, and that it preferred the heavy drudgery of the cold, inhospitable forest floor to the gay, unfettered life of the bird on the wing? Be this as it may. All these problems will ever remain unsolved, and we bow to the mighty powers of evolution that leaves us pondering over the extraordinary mysteries of Nature, whether they be of regeneration, or, as in the case of the kakapo, degeneration. Is it any wonder that such a quaint and mysterious bird should have occupied the attention, from time to time, of some of the world's most eminent scientists?

Parrots, as a rule, are not noted for dignity and workmanship in the matter of nest building, and in this respect the kakapo is no exception. The nest is just a rough excavation among the roots of some giant tree, with only the faintest attempt at linings or other considerations of comfort. From three to four eggs are laid; they are about the size of a bantam's egg and white in colouring.

The kakapo is fairly plentiful throughout the South Island, but is rarely heard of in the North Island. In the South Island, however, it seems to favour the forests of the west. From the wild bush-clad Sounds of the far south right up to the downs and mountains of the sunny north. In the province of Nelson colonies of kakapos are to be found. When travelling through the Buller Gorge some time ago I made the acquaintance of a reliable observer who told me of large colonies existing on certain mountain ranges surrounding the famous waterway.