



The Kaka Parrot is NOT a Kakapo. It is an entirely separate species. It inhabits much of New Zealand and some of the offshore islands. They are forest birds eating flowers, fruits, buds, etc., and stripping off bark looking for grubs and insects.

The thought of going to New Zealand to speak with aviculturists was very exciting. I did, however, have pictures in my mind of what I expected these people and their aviaries to look like. After all, New Zealand has not allowed the importation of exotic birds for many years and I expected that aviculture in this country must consist of mostly Cockatiels and Budgies. I was wrong. Their aviaries displayed beautiful Australian parrots, some of which we rarely see here in the United States, and there were conures, Indian parakeets, and Indonesian species as well. But the highlight of the tours were the native New Zealand parrots that could be found in many of the aviaries permitted to keep them. This is a luxury not afforded to aviculturists here in the United States. We are not permitted to keep birds that are native to the United States.

I arrived in Wellington, New Zealand after about 36 hours of traveling. Of course my luggage went on to ChristChurch, a city located on the South Island. It appears that someone with matching luggage, matching mine that is, took my suitcase through customs and on to their final destination.

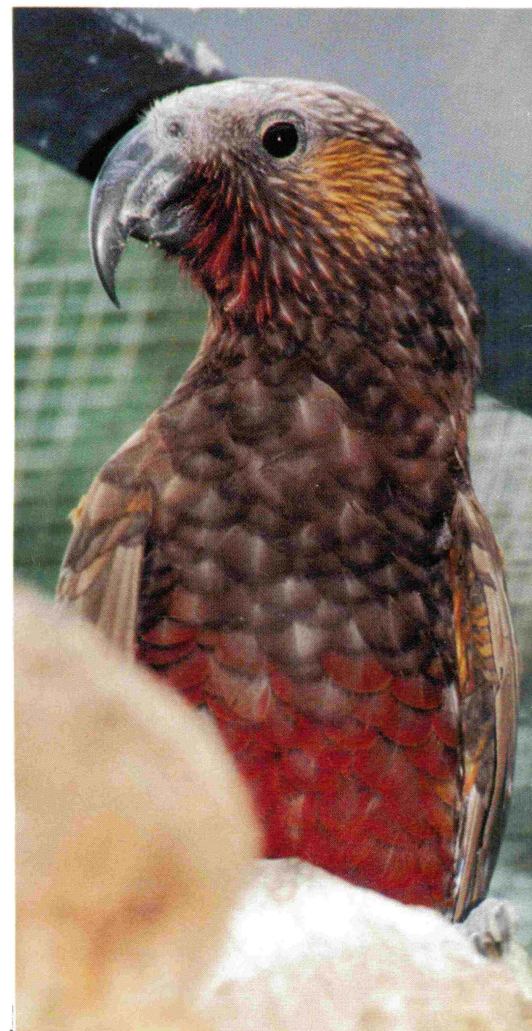
Two days without a change of clothing or the slide shows that I had prepared put me into a slightly stressed state of mind. But not too stressed to enjoy the hospitality and kindness of the people in this country.

After the airlines tracked my bag and delivered it to the home where I was staying, we prepared ourselves and departed for the South Island where the conference was to take place. The conference reminded me of the "good ol' days" of aviculture in the United States. By this I mean there were bird breeders, fanciers, avian veterinarians, supply vendors, behaviorists, pathologists, and government employed biologists present. A nice mixture of people all interested in one thing: keeping birds. The unity that is so important in aviculture still seems to be present in New Zealand. It was rather refreshing to see everyone together in one conference. I looked hard but didn't see any signs of "snobbery" among the participants. Everyone seemed to be there to learn and to communicate with each other. This is a lesson we could all profit from.

The conference went well. There were lectures on finches, parrots,

a Visit to New Zealand

Rick Jordan, Dripping Springs, TX



The Kea is a mountain forest bird of New Zealand. It was once hunted for bounty as the farmers accused it of killing sheep. It is now under some protection. The males often mate with numerous females. Odd bird.



The Takabe is a very uncommon and beautiful bird of New Zealand. This one came out of the bushes and picked at Jordan's shoelaces.



Very few people, indeed, get an eyeball to eyeball view of the endangered Kakapo.



Kakapos nest in holes or crevices in the rocks. Here "Hoki" bides in her man-made den.



"Hoki" the only Kakapo that is kept in captivity checks out Rick Jordan. Kakapos are flightless so Hoki had to climb up into the tree rather than fly into it.

native birds, conservation programs, disease and parasite determination, and much more. Each day offered an array of things to do and scheduled social events for the evenings. I must say that I was very impressed with the unity and the organization at this meeting.

One of the most exciting things to see was the attendance of government biologists from the New Zealand Department of Conservation (DOC). These people are equivalent to our Federal level officers of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. I will admit that there are a few problems that need to be solved between the keepers of the native birds and the DOC people, but, people from DOC did attend and conversation did take place between them and the aviculturists.

I feel confident that DOC will see the benefit of allowing their New Zealand aviculturists to breed the native parrots that the government is so interested in. In this way, and unlike the United States, the expertise to save these birds will be preserved in the aviaries of their own people. New Zealand will be one step ahead when habitat destruction forces another of their native birds toward extinction and they will not have to waste time learning the captive breeding biology

of these birds. My hat goes off to a government that realizes the importance of aviculture as it relates to saving the wild populations. I was very envious and had considered applying for citizenship right there at the conference.

During the conference I was invited by the New Zealand Department of Conservation to go to one of the government owned islands and take a look at a segment of the "Kakapo Recovery Program." Needless to say, I was excited over the prospect of seeing a live Kakapo. That is until I heard that I had to take a boat to the island. Boats and I never really did get along.

But, off to the dock I went and things worked out just fine. I hardly even noticed the 60 kilometer boat ride up through the sound because of the beautiful mountains, native forests, millions of jelly fish, and even a few penguins swimming along the way.

We arrived at Maud Island on Tuesday morning. This island is an uninhabited refuge for some of New Zealand's rare and wonderful birds. Only two houses exist on the entire island, both of which were used by the DOC personnel that were assigned to monitor the birds.

As I got off the boat I could feel the difference between this habitat and that of the islands with public access. It was a refreshing feeling coupled with a slight anxiety as to whether or not I had the right to invade this private space that was set aside for the birds. Too late to look back, the only way out was to get back in that boat and I wasn't about to do that for at least a day or two.

The atmosphere was peaceful, quiet, and isolated. The only sounds to be heard were the calls of the many different birds that roamed free throughout the bush. I was left alone for many hours to await the arrival of the young man who lived in the lodge and took care of the Kakapo on the island. He was to arrive by late evening. His assistant was off in the bush setting traps for rats or stoats that might have managed to swim to the island but as far as anyone knew, the island was completely predator free and the DOC made sure it stayed that way.

As I sat and waited for "Gideon," the DOC person assigned to the Kakapo program on Maud Island, I observed the bird life that was so abundant around me. New Zealand pigeons, Kingfishers, Oystercatchers, Tui, and little Fantails kept me amused with their antics and songs. After I thought that I had seen them all and sat down to do some writing, out of the tall grasses walked a "Takahe" who seemed very interested in me and the boots I was wearing. This beautiful purple and green swamp hen was once thought to be extinct in New Zealand until a small colony was rediscovered a few years ago. Through dedication and good avicultural technique, a population of at least 300 has been re-established in protected areas of the country. Right before my eyes, actually chewing on my boot laces, was a species that narrowly escaped eternity in a museum drawer. It was a rather exciting moment for me, one I shall surely remember for a long time.

The evening approached and Gideon returned to the island. After a brief introduction, I began to "pick his brain" for information on the Kakapo. He seemed used to it and admitted that many people ask him for information about the Kakapo on a regular basis. His term on this island started back in 1991 when he was sent here to trap predators after a stoat had been sighted.

Stoats are small weasel-like creatures that feed on birds, their eggs, and almost any other living thing that moves. After Gideon successfully trapped the few stoats that had swum to the island, he volunteered to remain on the island to begin the supplemental feeding and telemetry tracking of the five free roaming Kakapo that had been released here.

Gideon was dedicated to this cause. He is very interested in the Kakapo and he stated his views of the bird as "a mystical, ageless sort of bird that hides many things that we may never find out." He says he has "a soft spot" for them and he often feels "hypnotized by their character."

He certainly knew this species and its habits on Maud Island. He was able to tell me and show me things about this bird that almost made me feel he

was in touch with each and every bird. We could be walking through the bush and he would point in the direction of each bird, telling me of their favorite roosting sites. He often stopped and looked at native vegetation showing me where a Kakapo had been feeding the night before.

In the short two days that I spent with Gideon, I learned a great deal about "life in the wild." This was a facet of bird biology that I had not been exposed to. It was a challenging part of the study of parrots as here they are not in a captive situation and had to be tracked and observed on their own turf. In many ways, the practices that were incorporated into the program were the same as those we use in the aviary. This overlap allowed Gideon and I to exchange the knowledge we had of parrots in general and made the trip through the bush very exciting for me.

On my second day on the island, we had to make a trek up to the top of the highest peak to see the "bowls" that had been constructed by the free roaming male Kakapo. Being a "lekking" species, the males would create an arena where they could charm the females into mating. This was very unlike any other parrot species that I had experienced before. It was fascinating to see the bowls and to feel the timeless air that abounded in this part of the forest. Knowing how close this bird is to extinction, it made me feel strange to stand there and view their private mating areas.

The trip up to the top was exhausting for me. I had not "climbed" a real mountain in quite some time. Pulling myself up by the tree trunks and vines, I made slow progress as I pulled my way through the thick vegetation. On many occasions I found myself stopping for a rest just to catch my breath. Somehow I knew that, in the end, it would all be worth it.

As I climbed out of the bush at the top of the mountain, suddenly a new world appeared before my very eyes. Standing at the crest of the hill, I could look out over the sound in all directions from the island. The view was breathtaking, and I was already quite short of breath just from the climb. I hated to think that I had to climb back

down after Gideon had completed servicing the feeding stations for the Kakapo. Although wild, the Kakapo on the Island have become accustomed to eating out of little plastic hoppers that were specially designed for them. They could lift the lids of the hoppers with their heads, and take the food or water that they desired. Every other day, Gideon or his assistant had to climb up to these stations and record the amounts that had been consumed while replenishing the supply. I couldn't help thinking how much easier it would be if they could get the Kakapo to eat "pellets."

We did not actually view a wild Kakapo that day. I could hear them moving in the bushes only a few feet from where I was standing, but their natural camouflage was so effective that I could not detect them without the use of the telemetry equipment that tracked the radio collars they were wearing. I was astounded at how well they blended in with the surrounding bush.

So, after a long day on the mountain, we climbed down to the shore where the lodge was located. Just before dusk I was to experience the moment I had been waiting for—I would actually see a live Kakapo. As the sun began to sink in the New Zealand sky, we began a short climb up over the meadow. One hand-reared Kakapo was living in an enclosure near the base of the mountain. This enclosure was not what I had expected. I had not considered that the Kakapo was flightless and need only be caged by using a few walls. As we approached the enclosure I noticed that it was simply a section of the forest that had been surrounded by a seven foot wall.

The trees that would have been immediately outside of the wall had been cleared so the occupants could not jump over and escape into the wild. It was an ingenious way to keep a bird in its natural habitat without holding it in a wire cage. We entered the enclosure to see "Hoki," the only captive representative of the Kakapo.

Once inside, I looked around to see if I could spot her without assistance. She was sitting in the middle of the group of trees that had been left there

for protection. She realized that Gideon was accompanied by a stranger and she was apprehensive about approaching us at first. When she heard Gideon's voice, she came running over to see him. Still unsure about me, she would hang on Gideon's pant leg while watching to make sure I was not going to grab her.

I sat on a rock in the middle of the enclosure while I talked to Hoki in a reassuring voice. Suddenly she began to run towards me as if she planned to attack. At this point, I was the one who was unsure of the situation. I braced myself for what might be my first Kakapo bite on the leg. She did not bite, but stopped a few feet short of me and began to climb a spindly little tree so she could be eye to eye with the stranger. Once she was on my level, she leaned over and tried to get onto my shoulder. I was still too apprehensive to allow her this liberty.

After a few minutes of touching her head and making sure her intentions were honorable, I moved closer and allowed her to touch my shirt. It was a most moving experience to see this bird close up for the first time in my life. Although the pictures I had seen of this species had depicted them true to life, these photos could not capture the character of the beast. She reminded me of a Giant Green Sun Conure in the way she interacted with me. The excitement I felt will be with me for the remainder of my life.

Hoki and I got along rather well. I did not hold her, but instead, allowed her to climb up on my lap. I felt it would be "tabu" to humanize this bird to the point where she may not realize her role in the conservation of her kind. It was OK to interact with humans, but I wouldn't want her to depend on them and allow them to take advantage of her. She seemed quite sure that she knew her place in this forest. Often she would jump off of my lap and run into her den to peek out at me while I sat patiently and waited. I can now imagine how awesome it would be to visit the real Jurassic Park.

My short visit with Hoki created a new concern for this species. The conservation department in New Zealand has been struggling to save this bird

before it is gone forever. Only about 50 birds still exist and fewer than half of those are viable females. Their nesting habits are so specialized that human intervention cannot take place until the actual eggs have been laid.

Finding the nests is another problem, even with the use of telemetry, these birds can find some very isolated areas of the forest to call home. On other islands where the stoats and rats are still present, most nests will be destroyed before a conservation department employee can find them. A sad but true fact, this bird lives in a hostile forest where many factors play against it.

So, what is the answer to saving the Kakapo? I believe that the DOC in New Zealand has finally found a reasonable solution. They are allowing protected nests to remain in the forest and are pulling eggs from nests that may be in danger. The chicks will be reared by a "parrot" specialist and the weaned chicks will be introduced into enclosures similar to that of Hoki. When the first "captive" breeding takes place in one of these enclosures, the future for the Kakapo will begin to look a little brighter.

In the mean time, the Department of Conservation in New Zealand has a lot of work to do. They must try to make all of the islands predator free so this bird can reproduce without competition for food or environment. The personnel involved are quite dedicated and will do a great job as long as action takes priority over paperwork. This is truly a project our own government should take a lesson from. Birds cannot be saved with laws, permits, and paperwork. It requires a dedication to the cause and the use of brains and biology. The 1996 breeding season for this species should prove to be a turning point in its history—finally a private aviculturist will have the chance to assist in the rearing of Kakapo chicks!

Acknowledgments

Now that I have returned to my own niche, I realize that I have many people to thank for giving me the experience of a lifetime. I will be forever in debt to Mr. Don Merton, Des and Pauline Colpman, Gideon, Dave and his wife, Alan Saunders, the New Zealand Department of Conservation, Barry Caldwell and all the attendees of the AviAffair 95, and to my mother for giving me the tender heart that is required to really enjoy an experience like this one. ➤