

Kakarikis

a Bundle of Fun and Mischief

by Mike Owen, Ph.D.
Sunshine Coast
Queensland, Australia

Photo by Mike Owen



There are two subspecies of the kakariki, the Red-fronted (left) and the Yellow-fronted. Compare these photos with the description in the article. These appear to be pure.

Apartment living can be a problem if you love parrots but have neighbors who do not appreciate being awakened at the crack of dawn by a cockatoo telling the world it is the start of a bright, new and exciting day. Come to think of it, even if you live in a house in suburbia, there still might be a problem with neighbors. One bird to consider as a delightful companion bird for apartment living is the Kakariki, a bird that is active, mischievous, intelligent, constantly chattering away, but never loud enough to annoy the neighbors. As if this were not enough to recommend the Kakariki, it is able to talk as well.

Kakarikis are a smallish parrot, on average a little less than a Cockatiel in size, and originating from New Zealand. Two varieties are found in aviculture, the Red-fronted Kakariki *Cyanoromphus novaezelandiae* and

the Yellow-fronted Kakariki *C. auriiceps*. Several subspecies of each of these varieties are known, but in aviculture it is only the nominate subspecies of each that are available. In fact, some of the subspecies are now extinct.

Both birds are predominantly darkish green, becoming lighter on the underparts, with a red area on each side of the rump (usually hidden by the folded wings) and a bluish hue to the flight feathers. The Red-fronted Kakariki has a bright red crown on the head, with a red band extending through the eye from the nostrils to a red patch behind the eye. The Yellow-fronted has a red frontal band above the nostrils extending to the eye, and a yellow crown to the head. The Yellow-fronted is also slightly smaller in size. A feature of both species is the thickness of the feather cover, with a thick dark gray down under the contour feathers, no doubt a helpful feature to survive those

cold New Zealand winters. Various mutations are available, including a cinnamon, a yellow/green pied, and a beautiful lutino – a pure yellow bird which retains the red on the head.

The sexes are similar; however the male in both species is normally a slightly larger bird with a larger more dome-shaped head and a larger beak. Visually sexing a single bird can sometimes be difficult, unless one has plenty of experience with them, but when a pair is viewed together the differences are normally obvious.

One of the problems with Kakarikis in Australia, and it is a problem which I believe is even worse in the USA, is the occurrence of hybridization between the two species. They interbreed very readily, and like all hybrids, once hybridized are always hybridized. The gene pool is diminished as a result.

The feature to watch for to determine visually if a Kakariki is a hybrid is the head area. A Red-fronted Kakariki should never have any yellow feathers in the crown area on the head; it should be a pure red, and in addition, the red behind the eye should be well defined. Any yellow on the head indicates some Yellow-fronted blood somewhere in its ancestry. Similarly, with the Yellow-fronted Kakarikis there should be no red mixed in with the yellow of the crown, and there should be no red behind the eye of the bird. However even a pair of birds that appears pure on visual inspection may be carrying hybrid blood.

My first pair of Kakarikis was a Yellow-fronted pair that looked pure, but in every clutch they produced, there were a couple of chicks that would contain a faint red patch behind the eye and a few red feathers mixed in with the yellow on top of the head. Needless to say, breeding the two species together should be avoided.

When European settlement first occurred in New Zealand, both species of Kakarikis were extremely common in forest areas throughout the two main islands. However, the introduction of feral cats and other exotic animals soon led to a rapid decline for the Kakarikis. Being a curious and trusting bird, which spent a lot of time feeding on the ground, they were easy prey for the introduced hunters. These days

both species are rare on the mainland islands, especially the Red-fronted, but they are still quite common on certain offshore islands where feral predators are not found.

Both species are very common in Australia, especially the Yellow-fronted, and many small-scale aviculturists enjoy the sight and sound of a pair of Kakarikis in their aviaries. They have not been regarded as pet birds until recently, but increasingly their qualities as pets are being recognized. Our own pet Kakariki, called very originally "Kaki," is now about six years old, and is still as enjoyable to have around the house as when he was as a baby. Kaki is always on the go, constantly giving out his delightful quiet cackle, occasionally talking to us, and intensely curious about anything new in the house.

Apart from the enjoyment of owning a Kakariki as a pet, they also are an easy bird to breed in an indoor, apartment environment. Being active birds, they do need as big a cage as possible. A pair being kept for breeding rather than as pet birds would prefer a flight cage at least 4 x 2 x 2 feet. If the pair

are allowed out of the cage for exercise (they are fast and very skillful flyers) they will happily breed in a much smaller cage, but sufficient exercise is important for their mental and their physical well-being. One of their enjoyments in life is scratching around on the floor of a cage or aviary, and so suspended cages with wire mesh bottoms are not really suitable.

Pairs are best housed separately from other pairs of Kakarikis and from other birds if being kept for breeding, since they can be quite aggressive during the breeding season. I once tried to temporarily house overnight a young pair of Indian Ringnecks with a pair of Kakarikis that had eggs in the nest box, and the Ringnecks came off second best and had to be removed within the hour.

Pairs can happily be housed in adjoining cages though. Hand raised birds can be used for breeding quite successfully; however, it is best to make sure to have a pair together from weaning since I have found that pet Kakarikis isolated from their own kind for a year or more often do not accept

a mate when introduced.

The diet used in Australia is seed based, since pellet feeding is very rare in Australian aviculture. Mine get a standard small parrot seed mix, with lots of fruit, vegetables, and sprouted seed. They love fresh food, and will try virtually anything, being extremely curious. In the wild they seem to also feed on some insect life, obtained while scratching through the leaf litter on the forest floor, and I have found that they often enjoy, and benefit from when breeding, a few live mealworms each day. In fact a higher protein intake than say, Cockatiels would get, seems to be important to Kakarikis. When they are breeding I also add extra calcium to their diet, (a calcium/vitamin D3 mix called Calcivet in Australia) since I find that one of the major problems with breeding Kakarikis is that babies seem to suffer from a calcium absorption problem. Without supplementary calcium, broken legs are a common problem in nestlings, particularly since my birds normally breed in outside aviaries and the babies are so curious that they often leave the nest box too early and land



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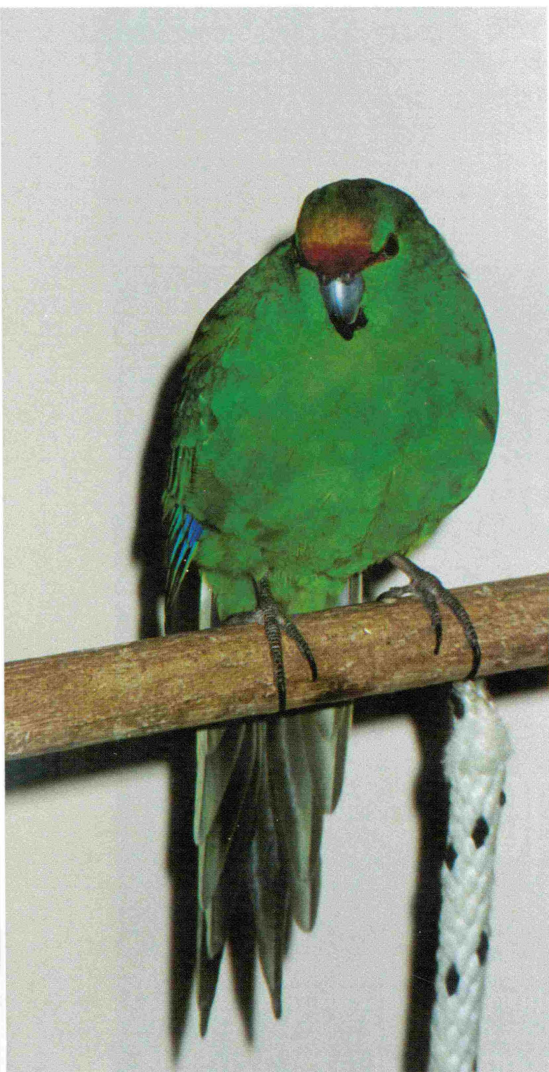
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Baby kakarikis are easy to handfeed and can make excellent and quiet pets.



When Red-fronted and Yellow-fronted Kakarikis hybridize, the result is a muddy yellow forehead with red feathers smearing the pure yellow.

heavily with their first flight.

Because of this curiosity, the nest box I use is similar to a Cockatiel box, but a bit deeper, about 18 to 20 inches, the extra depth makes it harder for the babies to leave too early. If they are being bred in a smaller inside flight cage then the problem with baby birds landing heavily will not be the problem it is in larger aviaries. In practice, they seem remarkably unconcerned about their nestbox, and I have had them breed in boxes ranging from Budgie to Alexandrine size.

Breeding of Kakarikis in Australia takes place mainly in the Spring and early Summer, but they can breed at any time of the year. Most of us with outside aviaries try to discourage them from breeding in the hottest part of the year. They have that thick down cover, and the babies can be very susceptible to high temperatures and, as a result, die in the nest due to overheating. If my birds have babies when an early hot spell comes along, I take the top of the nestbox off in the morning to allow better air circulation, putting it back on at dusk. This doesn't worry the parents, who will continue to use the normal opening. Again, in an apartment, the problem probably will not occur.

They can breed at six months, and go on breeding to 12 years, with the normal clutch being 5-8 eggs. The

largest clutch I have heard of is 12, with all hatching. That must definitely be a record for the parrot world. I find that their breeding pattern can be quite erratic, they can lay two or three clutches one after another, then go long periods with no interest in breeding. My first Red-fronted pair had two clutches in the spring of 1995 (September-November here). They then refused to breed at all in 1996 but resumed in 1997.

Only the hen incubates, for about 20 days, and she will often pull out all the feathers on her chest to make a brood spot. The theory is that this enables her to warm the eggs more quickly after leaving the nest for a short period to feed, since her warm flesh is in direct contact with the eggs. The babies have a thick dark down, definitely looking like they are meant for a cold climate. They leave the nest at about five weeks.

The babies are easy to hand rear and I normally take them out at about two weeks. While they do make excellent pets, they sometimes can be a bit remote regarding affection. A single bird, especially the female, may often allow scratches, but the males and those kept with other birds will rarely tolerate being touched around the head. They all will enjoy being with you for a little while, at least until something more exciting attracts their attention. Males are better talkers than females, in fact I have never heard of a female saying anything more than "hello."

I have found them to be mostly free from disease, although they have a reputation here for sudden unexpected death. My own feeling is that this is due more to poor care of the birds than any inherent health problems. A varied diet is essential, as is sufficient mental stimulation to keep them happy. Given a good diet and an entertaining environment, their life span is about 15 years.

So, if your living arrangements demand a quiet bird that neighbors will not complain about; if you want a bird that is a little bit independent, but which will still enjoy your companionship; a bird full of life and curiosity; and a bird that is quite willing to breed in an apartment situation, then a Kakariki might be the one for you. 