

THE KEA

New Zealand's Clown of the Mountains



An adult Kea in Fiordland, New Zealand.
Photo: Mark Whatmough

The Kea, *Nestor notabilis*, is a large species of parrot (family Strigopidae) found in forested and alpine regions of the South Island of New Zealand. The term *Kea* is both singular and plural. It is one of the few alpine parrots in the world. Their varied diet includes carrion, but consists mainly of roots, leaves, berries, nectar, and insects. The Kea was once plentiful, but is now uncommon, as it was once killed for bounty as it preyed on livestock, especially sheep. It only received full protection in 1986.

Kea are known for their intelligence and curiosity, both vital elements for survival in a harsh mountain environment. They can solve logical puzzles, such as pushing and pulling things in a certain order to get to food, and will cooperatively work as a group to achieve a certain objective.

The Kea was described by the British ornithologist John Gould in 1856. Their specific epithet, the Latin term *notabilis*, means "noteworthy". The common name is from Māori, and probably represents the screech of the bird.

In addition to the Kea the genus *Nestor* contains three other species: the New Zealand Kaka, *Nestor meridionalis*, and the extinct Norfolk Island Kākā, *N. Productus*, and the Chatham Island Kākā (*N. sp.*). All four are thought to stem from a "proto-Kākā", dwelling in the forests of New Zealand about five million years ago. Their closest relative is the Kākāpō, *Strigops habroptila*.

The Kea is a large parrot 48cm (19") in length and with a weight of about 1kg (2.2lb). The plumage is mostly olive-green; the grey beak has a long narrow down-curved upper mandible¹. The adult has dark-brown irises, the cere, eye-rings, and legs are grey. There are orange feathers on the undersides of the wings. The feathers on the sides of the face are dark olive-brown, those on the back and rump are orange-red, and some of the outer-wing feathers are dull-blue. The broad tail is bluish-green with a black tip. Feather shafts project at the tip of the tail and the undersides of the inner tail feathers have yellow- orange crosswise stripes. The length of the male

X



Kea in flight
Photo: "Avenue"

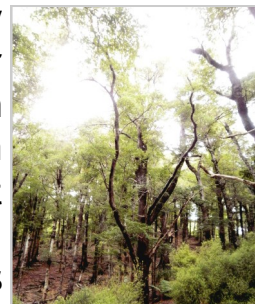
is about five percent greater than that of the female, and the male's upper mandible is twelve to fourteen percent longer than the female's. Juveniles generally resemble adults, but have a yellow cere and eye-rings, an orange-yellow lower mandible, and grey-yellow legs.

The Kea is one of ten parrot species endemic to New Zealand. The other mainland species being the Kākā, *N. meridionalis*, the Kākāpō, *Strigops habroptila*, and the three Kākāriki species: the Yellow-crowned, *Cyanoramphus auriceps*, the Red-fronted, *Cyanoramphus novaezelandiae*, and the Orange-crowned, *Cyanoramphus malherbi*. The other New Zealand parrot species are the Chatham Island Kākā (*N. sp.*), the Chatham Kākāriki, *Cyanoramphus forbesi*, from the Chatham Islands, the Antipodes Island Kākāriki, *Cyanoramphus unicolour*, and Reischek's Kākāriki, *Cyanoramphus hochstetteri*, the latter two species being endemic to Antipodes Island. An unidentified parakeet also lived on Campbell Island, but was extinct by 1840.



Range (in green)
Map: "KimvdLinde"

The Kea ranges from the lowland river valleys and coastal forests of the west coast up to the alpine regions of the South Island such as: Arthur's Pass and Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park. They closely associated throughout their range with the southern beech (*Nothofagus*) forests. Apart from occasional vagrants, Kea are not found in the North Island, although fossil evidence suggests they were present over ten



Beech forest
Nothofagus spp.
Photo: "Rudolph89"

thousand years ago.

In 1986 the population was estimated at between 1,000 and 5,000 individuals. However, in 1992 an estimate of 15,000 was made, but both estimates are heavily dependent upon a number assumptions made. The Kea's widespread distribution, at low population density and inaccessible habitat prevents accurate estimates.

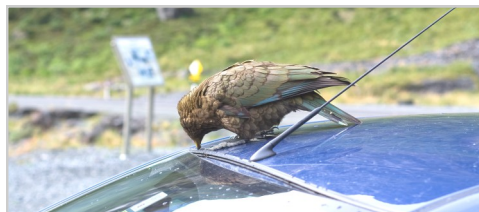
The Kea's highly developed urge to explore and manipulate, combined with strong neophilia¹, makes this bird both a pest for residents and an attraction for tourists. Called "the clown of the mountains", they will investigate backpacks, boots or even cars, often causing damage or flying off with smaller items. People commonly encounter wild Kea in South Island ski areas. The Kea are attracted by the prospect of food scraps, and

¹Neophilia can be defined as a personality type characterized by a strong affinity for novelty.

their curiosity leads them to peck and carry away unguarded items of clothing, or to pry apart rubber cartrimming, much to both the delight and annoyance of human observers. Their cheeky habits have caused severe embarrassment at times. There is even a report of one making off with a Scottish man's passport while he was visiting Fiordland National Park.



A Kea encounter of the close kind
Photo: Peti Morgan



Mmm! Vintage trim 2006, my favourite.
Photo: Joshin Yamada

Chick mortality is high with less than forty percent surviving their first year. The median lifespan of a wild sub-adult Kea has been estimated at just five years. Kea are a social species and live in groups of up to thirteen. Isolated individuals do badly in captivity but respond well to mirror images. Two males in the Adelaide Zoo were on display for many years, I well remember them from my childhood visits in the 1940s and they were still there well into my adult life. They have been reported to live for up to fifty years in captivity.

The breeding areas are most commonly in Southern Beech (*Nothofagus*) forests, located on steep mountain sides. Breeding at heights of 1600m (5250 feet) above sea level and higher. Kea are one of the few parrot species in the world to regularly spend time above the tree line. Nest sites are usually positioned on the ground beneath large beech trees, in rock crevices or in burrows dug between roots. They are accessed by tunnels 1-6m (3.3-20 feet) leading into a larger chamber, which is furnished with lichens, moss, ferns and rotting wood. The breeding season is from July to January. Two to five white eggs are laid per clutch, the incubation period is about twenty-one days, and the chicks fledge after ten to thirteen weeks.



Kea Chicks

From:
*A History of the Birds of
New Zealand*
Walter Lawry Buller-1888

The Kea is an omnivore, feeding on more than forty plant species¹, beetle larva, other birds and mammals (including sheep and rabbits). They have been observed breaking open Shearwater (*Puffinus* spp.) nests to feed on the chicks having heard them calling. The Kea also takes advantage of human garbage and "gifts" of food. In captivity, they are fond of butter, nuts, apples, carrots, grapes, mangoes, figs, bread, dairy products, ground meat and pasta.

¹They are particularly fond of the nectar of flax, rata, snow totara and coprosma.

There was a long-running controversy about whether the Kea preys on sheep. Sheep suffering from unusual wounds on their sides or loin were noticed by the mid-1860s, which was within a decade of sheep farmers moving into the high country. Although some new disease was first thought to be the cause, suspicion soon fell on the Kea. The head shepherd at Wanaka Station, James MacDonald, witnessed a Kea attacking a sheep in 1868, and similar accounts were widespread. Prominent contemporary members of the scientific community accepted that Kea attacked sheep, with Alfred Wallace even citing this as an example of behavioural change in his 1889 book *Darwinism*. Despite these accounts others remained unconvinced. For instance, in 1962, the animal specialist J.R. Jackson concluded that while Kea might attack sick or injured sheep, they were not a significant predator. However, in 1993 their nocturnal assaults were captured on video, thus proving that at least some Kea attack and feed on healthy sheep. The video showed that Kea use their powerful down-curved beak and claws to rip through the wool and eat fat from the back of the animal. Though the bird does not directly kill the sheep, death can result from blood poisoning or accidents suffered by animals trying to escape. There have also been reports of Kea attacking rabbits, dogs, and even horses.

The New Zealand government instituted a bounty for Kea beaks soon after sheep farmers complained of Kea damage to their flocks. It was intended bounty hunters would only kill Kea on the farms and in council areas where the bounty applied, but some hunted them in national parks and in Westland, where they were officially protected. More than 150,000 were killed in the hundred years up to 1970, when the bounty was lifted. The Kea received partial protection only after a census counted only 5000 birds in the 1970s. The government then agreed to investigate reports of problem birds and have them removed to other areas. It was not until 1986 that the Kea was afforded full protection under the Wildlife Act 1953.



Brushtail Possum and young
Photo: "Noodle snacks"

A study of Kea numbers in the Nelson Lakes National Park showed a substantial decline in the population between 1999 and 2009, primarily caused by egg and chick predation. Video cameras set up to monitor Kea nests in South Westland confirmed that the introduced Brushtail Possum, *Trichosurus vulpecular*, is a major predator of Kea fledglings. The Kea is classed as Nationally Endangered in the New Zealand Threat Classification System and Vulnerable in the IUCN Red List.

R.V.C. With help from Wikipedia

