

A large cosmopolitan family of often very colourful birds, but the NZ species are relatively drab, mainly green. All have a short bill with a horn covering (cere) enclosing the nostrils. The upper mandible is strongly curved, fitting neatly over the lower mandible. Their legs are short, and their feet have two toes pointing forward and two back.

KEA *Nestor notabilis*

Locally common endemic

46 cm; ♂ 1000 g, ♀ 800 g. A large, often bold parrot, olive green with scarlet underwings and rump. Dark-edged feathers make it look sculpted. Bill, cere, eye and legs dark brown; upper mandible longer in the male. Juvenile has pale crown, yellow cere, eye-ring and on bill; yellow fades in a couple of years to bill only. *Call a loud ringing 'keee-aa'*, mainly in flight. Delights in aerobatics and playful but sometimes destructive behaviour. **Habitat:** Mainly in alpine zone, but also in forest and descends to lowland river flats. **Breeding:** Jul–Mar. [Sp 262]



SULPHUR-CRESTED COCKATOO



COCKATOOS and PARROTS

Cacatuidae and Psittacidae

About 330 species worldwide; 10 breed in New Zealand. Five are endemic to New Zealand, 1 is native and 4 have been introduced.

Parrots are well known for their colourful plumage and are widely held in captivity.

All have a large head and eyes, a short neck, and a short, deep bill. Mainly herbivorous, although some also eat invertebrates. The upper mandible of the bill is strongly curved, sharply pointed, and hinged at the base so that the parrot can crack nuts or other

unyielding food. Parrots can use their bill as an extra limb, showing great agility at climbing. They have a large fleshy cere, surrounding the nostrils. Two toes are pointed forwards and two back, giving a strong grip. Parrots can hold food while shredding it and pass it to their mouth. Most parrots are gregarious, and many have loud, harsh voices. They mostly lay white eggs in holes in trees or in crevices in rocks.

Reading: Forshaw, J.M. & Cooper, W.T. 1978. *Parrots of the World*. Melbourne: Lansdowne.

262. KEA *Nestor notabilis*

Plate 60

Size: 46 cm; males 1000 g, females 800 g

Distribution: South Island only. Kea are in high country from northwestern Nelson and Marlborough southward to Fiordland. They are mostly in high-altitude forest, the mountains, and high alpine basins and steep valleys; but they often come down to the lowland flats, mainly on the west of the Southern Alps, and have also been recorded as far afield as Farewell Spit lighthouse. Subfossils at one North Island site indicate a previously wider range, and odd records from the Tararua Range could be of birds crossing Cook Strait or cage escapees from nearby collections.

Population: Little known; probably c. 5000 birds.

Conservation: Protected rare endemic. Kea range widely, and so it is difficult to assess population trends. They have received wide publicity as sheep killers; while they certainly feed on dead sheep, and occasionally kill sick and injured sheep, only a few birds actually attack healthy sheep. Thousands of Kea were killed for a bounty until they were partially protected in 1970. They were fully protected in 1986.

Kea are playful and inquisitive, but are destructive, and soon make themselves unwelcome at ski-fields and subalpine carparks, on hut roofs and tents. The worst offending birds are caught and transferred to distant sites or taken into captivity.

Breeding: Males may often be polygamous, i.e. support more than one nesting female.

Kea nest in holes in the ground, under logs and in cavities among the jumbled boulders of old moraines overgrown with scrub and trees, usually in the upper forest. The nest comprises twigs, grasses, moss and lichens. In July–January, they lay 2–4 white eggs (44 x 33 mm). Females alone incubate for 23–24 days. The males feed the females while they are incubating and after hatching. The fledging period is 90–100 days. Young are probably over 3 years old before they breed. The oldest Kea recorded in the wild lived over 20 years.

Behaviour: Gregarious; flocks of mainly juvenile and subadult males gather at ski-field carparks and refuse dumps, and small groups of 5–15 birds are seen elsewhere. Their call is a ringing, far-carrying 'keee-aa', an evocative sound, especially when heard in the swirling mists of the alpine tops. They fly strongly and delight in tumbling in air currents. **Feeding:** Mostly herbivorous, feeding on berries and shoots. Many have learnt to fossick through refuse dumps and eat carrion and food scraps. A few may specialise in using their bill to dig into the flesh of healthy sheep above the kidneys; the sheep may develop a large festering area above the kidneys or blood poisoning.

Reading: Bond, A.B. & Diamond, J. 1992. *Notornis* 39: 151–160. Clarke, C.M.H. 1970. *Notornis* 17: 105–114. Wilson, K.-J. 1990. *Forest & Bird* 21: 20–26.