

## A Quaint Bird of New Zealand— The Kakapo

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Of the many quaint and wonderful birds inhabiting the dense sub-alpine forests and marshy lowlands of the West Coast of the South Island of New Zealand, the Kakapo (*Stringops hap-roptilus*) stands out pre-eminently as a striking example of the probability of extraordinary changes having been wrought in the history of bird life.

The Kakapo is attached to the order *Psittaciformes*, which claims our various Parrots, and is the sole member of the family *Stringopidae*. It is a bird of rather bulky proportions, considerably larger than the White Cockatoo of Australia, and resembling in form the heavy erect set of an Owl, with short powerful legs and heavy clawed feet. Such structural lines would not, as a rule, inspire one with the hope that beauty could lend itself lavishly in the ultimate adornment, but, strange to say, the Kakapo is arrayed in a most wonderful and beautiful plumage, a fact all the more bewildering when one realises that the bird is nocturnal in its habits. The predominant shade in this extravagant plumage forms a rich background of pale moss green, flecked and spangled with gold, relieved on the back and wings with sections of warm brown markings. The wings are heavy and 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 among our many flightless birds; the muscles of the wings being apparently too weak to render them of any use. Even when attacked or hurrying off from some enemy, only the slightest effort is made to bring the large useless wings into action, and consequently it falls an easy prey to the hunter's dog. Like others of our nocturnal birds, the Kakapo makes its hiding place and nesting place in the ground among the roots of trees, or in the cavities of rocks, where it conceals itself practically the whole day long. Occasionally, however, it ventures out in the day time, and may sometimes be discovered in the open basking in the sunshine; when approached it will seldom make any serious attempt to escape, but when captured it defends itself with claws and beak. Once a captive, it soon becomes a great pet, and ere many days are passed its degree of intelligence becomes very pronounced, in some cases quite equal to that of an ordinary dog.

Hutton and Drummond, in their work entitled "The Animals of New Zealand," write of this bird as follows:—"Size, appearance, and habits of life, combine to make the Kakapo one of the most remarkable birds in the Dominion. Its intelligence commands respect, and its helplessness, sympathy; while its genial nature endears it to all who know it well. It repays kindness with gratitude, is as affectionate as a dog, and as playful as a kitten."

Though a Parrot, I have never known the Kakapo to learn to talk; its brilliant intellect works in other directions entirely, for it never tires of learning new and difficult tricks. In fact, it demands special attention from one whom it makes a friend. A Kakapo in a bush camp is the life and soul of the lonely habitation, and the wonderful and original tricks performed by this entertainer are beyond description. On one occasion, when exploring the heights of that wonderful rugged cape, located at the mouth of the Waitaha River, in Westland, known as Bold Head, my party discovered a large male Kakapo basking in the warm sand. It was captured after a short chase, and although it set up a defence, it was perfectly subdued within half an hour, and began to play with its captors—something in the nature of cats' play. During the three days it was kept in camp, it was persistently looking for excitement and play. The bird is usually referred to by the back country settlers as the "Ground Parrot," but being a splendid climber it frequently finds its way into the tops of the medium sized shrubs and trees. When climbing, much use is made of the powerful beak; a half right and left method is adopted.

The food of this quaint bird consists of grasses, berries, seeds, leaves, etc., and having secured a good supply during the night and early hours of the morning, it takes off to its secluded resting place, where the daylight hours are usually spent.

As a general rule birds of nocturnal habits are feathered in some dull, unattractive shading, usually greys and browns, but the Kakapo is, among the nocturnal birds of New Zealand, the one striking exception to this rule. Does it not seem something 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 worked in the life of the bird. Its brilliant plumage, for instance, immediately suggests that there was a time in the history of the bird when its habits were diurnal, when it loved to bask and gambol in the bright glistening sunshine, when the gorgeous plumage rivalled that of all other birds in sending forth a dazzling radiation. Another somewhat convincing aspect which forces us to the conclusion that a wonderful change has taken place, lies in the fact that the shade of the green plumage is identical with the predominant shade of the mossy vales in which the bird delights to feed, suggesting a protective coloration. Hence, if it were originally destined for nocturnal habits, protective coloration in so marked a degree would not be necessary. But why should such a radical change have taken place?

The Kakapo is fairly plentiful throughout the South Island, but seems to honour the West Coast as its happiest hunting grounds. From the wild bush-clad Sounds in the far South right up to the downs and mountains of the Sunny North, in the Province of Nelson, colonies of the Kakapo are to be found.

When travelling through the Buller Gorge recently I made the acquaintance of a reliable observer, who told me of their large colonies existing in certain mountain ranges surrounding the famous waterway.

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 a rough excavation, with only the faintest attempt at linings and comfort. The nest usually contains three or four white eggs, about two inches in length. "Kakapo" is the name given to the bird by the Maoris, and means "Night Parrot." As this name has been handed down for many generations, it would seem that at least for many centuries past, this bird has been possessed of nocturnal habits, in all probability was always a nocturnal bird, but still the circumstantial evidence mentioned above is quite sufficient to lead one to the belief that a wonderful change has come over the bird during some ancient period. It is difficult at times to reconcile existing conditions with the scientific theories which tell us 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 thick legs, and heavy clawed feet, all tell us that such a bird was never created to work out its destiny on the floor of the forest. In fact, these outstanding features alone immediately force us to the conclusion that this bird was at one time a flyer, 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, from hilltop to hilltop, and that it preferred the heavy drudgery of the cold, inhospitable forest floor, to the gay life of the bird on the wing? All these things must remain unanswered, and we bow to the mighty powers of evolution that leave us pondering over the extraordinary mysteries of Nature, whether they are of regeneration, or as in the case of the bird under notice, degeneration.

**The Turquoise Parrot on the Nullarbor Plain.**—In view of the great scarcity of the Turquoise Parrot (*Neophema pulchella*), any note as to present-day habitat is of interest. When representatives of the Australian Museum were at Ooldea, in 1921, they secured one young male of this species. Mr. G. A. Heumann noted a pair in the same district a little later. In answer to inquiry, Mr. A. Bolan, Stationmaster at Ooldea, who is a keen naturalist, sends me the following note:—"Regarding the Grass Parrot, yes, I have noted a bird answering description—small, living in grass; greenish back, blue face, yellowish underneath. I noticed one last year in a donga out on the Nullarbor Plain. I remember stopping and having a good look, as he was so pretty."—A. S. LE SOUEF, C.M.Z.S., Taronga Park, Sydney.