

The Hopeful Story of the Parrot that Cannot Fly

Thousands of miles away in the forests of New Zealand lives the heaviest and only flightless species of parrot in the world. This is the kākāpō, a beautiful bird the colour of emeralds with whiskers around its beak and short wings only used for balance and parachuting from trees down to the ground. These birds are native to New Zealand and live in forests at ground level.

Adult kākāpōs are about 24-25 inches from end of the beak to the tip of the tail and have an average weight of four pounds. The parrots are bright green to blend in with the ferns and other natural greenery that is their home. Like many other birds native to New Zealand, kākāpōs are flightless so they get around by galloping through the underbrush, using their strong legs to carry them forward and their short wings for balance. They can also climb trees using their beaks like climbers using anchors on rock faces. The birds will do this in order to dine on the higher up leaves and berries, especially the fruit from a rimu tree which is their favourite snack, however most of their food can be found on the forest floors. Kākāpōs are known as the owl parrot because they are nocturnal and have obvious facial discs like all owl species do.

The description of these fascinating birds may make someone want to travel out to New Zealand just to meet this wondrous owl parrot but the truth is that these birds are almost impossible to find as kākāpōs are critically endangered. There are several reasons that have led to the kākāpō's endangerment but there is no denying that almost all of these are human caused, in particular, introducing predators to New Zealand.

Before humans inhabited New Zealand, there were no land-based mammals in the country and the kākāpō's only predators were flying birds of prey such as the Haast's eagle which is now extinct. To protect themselves from these birds who had keen eyes but no sense of smell, the

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kākāpōs would freeze to blend in with their environment if they ever felt threatened. The birds evolved to have a keen sense of smell and a unique odour so they could find each other without attracting any unwanted attention.

To attract mates, male kākāpōs travel to high points or clearings and inflate their bodies like balloons in order to make huge booming noises which can be heard from up to five kilometres away. However, this sound tends to echo off the trees so they also make a higher skraarking or chinging call to help others pinpoint their location. The males do this for up to eight hours every night for a couple of months which gives the females, and humans, plenty of time to find them

The way the kākāpō's mating process has evolved has not been entirely helpful for the species.

For example, while the males are making their strange calls to attract as many females as possible, the females are having to raise the chicks on their own. This means that while the female is away looking for food, a number of predators could find the nest in the bushes and steal, break, or eat the eggs. The other problem is that kākāpōs have an average lifespan of 58 years. Obviously, a long lifespan is not entirely a bad thing for an endangered species but it does mean that kākāpōs feel no rush to breed. Males start breeding at the age of four and females at six. After this, they will still only breed every two to four years and recent studies have shown that this depends on food availability, in particular if rimu trees are fruiting that year.

In around 1280, explorers from Polynesia discovered New Zealand and started to settle in. This was when the kākāpō numbers, and the numbers of many other birds native to New Zealand, started to drop. Not only did the Polynesians, later known as the Māori, hunt kākāpō for meat and feathers but they had also brought kiores, or Polynesian rats, along in the boats. The kiores hunted on land and mainly used their sensitive noses to track prey. Kākāpōs proved to be an easy

meal for the greedy rats because their unique scents made them easy to identify and their habit of freezing when threatened only helped the rats to catch them.

In the 19th century, Europeans started settling in New Zealand. The Māori had already started making clearings in the New Zealand forests but the Europeans destroyed the forests, the kākāpō's home, on an even larger scale, further endangering the birds. To add to this, the Europeans brought with them more mammalian predators including cats and stoats. Since these are both nocturnal, it was easier for them to catch the kākāpō. Europeans also wanted to catch the kākāpō for food, feathers, and pets. Kākāpōs are extremely friendly birds and have been known to come up to strangers and "introduce" themselves, having a behavior "more like that of a dog than a bird" as George Edward Gray, a British ornithologist, once wrote. This meant that the kākāpō was easy to find and there became a demand for keeping the birds as pets.

All together, these factors led to a huge problem of the kākāpōs becoming critically endangered. They would be extinct by now if it was not for awareness being raised, especially by the Kākāpō Recovery Program. Back in the 1800s, a conservationist called Richard Henry was responsible for setting up a predator-free island off the coast of Fiordland. He helped transport several hundred kākāpōs to this island because even then kākāpōs were endangered. Unfortunately though, stoats later reached this island and no kākāpōs survived. By the early 1970s, only 18 kākāpō were known to exist in the wild. All of these parrots were males and lived in Fiordland which is a national park in the southwest of the South Island. The entire species was considered doomed with no females left to reproduce. Luckily, in 1977, 200 kākāpō were discovered living on Stewart Island, which is 30 kilometers south of the South Island, and this group of birds included males and females. All 200 of these kākāpō, as well as the five remaining kākāpō in Fiordland, were soon transported to predator-free islands off the coast of Stewart Island. These

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islands included Codfish Island, Anchor Island, Maud Island, and Little Barrier Island and all but Maud Island are still being used as kākāpō sanctuaries to this day. However the problem was not quite solved as the islands still had rats eating the eggs and defenseless chicks and in 1995 the population was back down to 51. Since then, the Kākāpō Recovery Team has been working nonstop to remove rats from the islands and increase the number of chicks being born and surviving each year. In 2000, there were 62 kākāpōs known in the wild and by 2015, the population had increased to just less than 160.

This is a great sign as it shows that the kākāpō population is now increasing at a somewhat steady rate. However their story is not quite over as 160 birds is a tiny number and kākāpōs are still one of the most endangered animals in the world. The number of kākāpōs left is such a small number in fact that most of the remaining birds have been given names by various scientists including Sirocco who is Kākāpō Recovery's mascot and Richard Henry in recognition of his namesake's work. In order to help the kākāpō population rise even more there are a number of things that anybody would be able to do. For example, donating any amount of money would be a huge help as it would be used to feed or track the kākāpōs. There are several organisations that help kākāpō including Kākāpō Recovery, WWF, and Forest and Bird New Zealand. If money is not an option, it would be just as helpful to do something even simpler such as raising awareness and not letting pet cats or other mammals loose near forests.

Kākāpōs are definitely in need of help to stop them from becoming extinct but there are also thousands of other animals whose existence is threatened and since humans are almost always the cause of animal endangerment, humans owe it to the animal kingdom to look out for these animals and do whatever is in their power to protect them. It is necessary to stop other animals from ending up like the kākāpō by looking after the environment and protecting both the animals

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and the forests. Anybody can make a difference, whether they have a big role in an animal protection society or they are a kid with a dream, just as Richard Henry once was. It only takes that one dream and the courage to make it happen.

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