

## REVIEW

### Rescued from the brink of extinction: Kakapo

Alison Ballance

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215pp. Hard Cover NZ\$49.90

In her book "Rescued from the brink of extinction: Kakapo" Alison Ballance gives us a gripping, informative and detailed insight into the life and challenges of one of the most charismatic and startling, yet critically endangered birds, the kakapo (*Strigops habroptilus*). Nocturnal, flightless, the largest and heaviest parrot worldwide (Powlesland *et al.* 2006) and the only one with a lekking system (Merton *et al.* 1984), this bird tops one superlative after another and still puzzles the scientific world with many questions remaining unresolved.

Ballance elegantly presents many of these questions regarding the behaviour and biology of this New Zealand endemic parrot, once so abundant, that it dropped out of trees when shaking them. She poses questions, offers possible solutions and gives the reader multiple insights into the life strategies, history and conservation of the kakapo. The book is organised in 3 parts and 28 chapters. The first 5 chapters introduce the bird from the perspective of a female Kakapo life versus that of a male. Alison Ballance illustrates the contrasting lifestyles and tasks of the 2 sexes, which ultimately unite them for the all-important breeding season. A chapter on rimu (*Dacrydium cupressinum*) illustrates the critical importance of fruiting and seeding of masting trees for a successful kakapo breeding year. This chapter is particularly relevant to kakapo conservation as the infrequent and irregular fruiting of rimu demonstrates the ongoing challenge of finding a suitable nutritional surrogate to stimulate kakapo breeding.

The 2nd part of the book is fully dedicated to an historical account of kakapo in New Zealand. These 5 chapters give a deep insight into the causes of the relentless and steep decline of kakapo which only narrowly escaped extinction in the last century. It was only persistence and targeted conservation efforts that turned the tide for kakapo and appropriately 3 chapters pay tribute to the numerous people that believed in the continued existence of kakapo, and spared no effort to find them. The extensive efforts made by Richard Henry in the late 1800s to introduce kakapo to Resolution I ultimately failed but the concept of marooning

birds in safe locations has been used in the modern era of not only kakapo management, but also for a whole suite of endemic and endangered species in New Zealand.

The 3rd and last part of the book encompasses 18 chapters addressing life on Codfish I, currently the most important site for kakapo. It gives a very personal account on the daily practices on Codfish, enhanced by the authors own experiences working on the island. The daily and manifold duties of rangers and volunteers over the year are explained in detail and give a vivid picture about the enormous physical, and as the reader could guess, financial efforts that are part of kakapo conservation. This section helps the reader understand what it really means to save a species from the brink of extinction, the set-backs and how they are resolved. Numerous examples of more practical questions of kakapo conservation underline this effort, such as finding a suitable diet, managing inbreeding, determining paternity, finding suitable mates and rearing kakapo chicks in years of poor rimu masting. The book closes with thoughts about the future of kakapo, while the appendix lists every single kakapo and denotes individual characteristics, which completes the book nicely.

What makes this well written book so interesting and colourful is not just the rich and remarkable colour pictures, but the whole structure of the book itself. The gentle turn from the vivid picture of the daily challenges facing individual kakapo, the historical account of the bird, and lastly the very personal and colourful account of kakapo conservation, filled with personal stories from the author on Codfish I, make this book an interesting and worthwhile read for anybody interested in kakapo research or conservation. My only criticism is that more references would have been appreciated. Otherwise I can only recommend this true tribute to the kakapo.

#### LITERATURE CITED

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