

Welcome to Kakapo Paradise

by Dr. Pat Latas, DVM

Once considered extinct, the amazing kakapo is now up to 131 individuals. Thanks to the huge effort of the New Zealand Department of Conservation's Kakapo Recovery Programme, the labor-intensive operation is a success due to hard work of the staff and volunteers, and the intense dedication to the strangest parrot in the world. I was honored to serve as a "nestminder" volunteer on Whenua Hou, the protected and predator-free island sanctuary that is the Kakapo Paradise.

Whenua Hou has many meanings in the Maori language. It can mean "new home" or "land of feathers", and several other interpretations. Any of them fit the present use. The Maori iwi that are from Whenua Hou are involved with kakapo conservation, and one of the volunteers (Estelle) had ancestors whose last refuge was Whenua Hou. A beautiful circle and tribute to a bird so meaningful to Maori life.

The nestminder's day

There are many volunteers on the island: those who carry huge packs and fill the dozens of feeding stations all over the island; cooks and handymen; chick hand-feeders, and others. My job was to be a nestminder and guard the precious mother, eggs and chicks from mishap. Predators included the endemic moorpark owl, and several species of petrels who compete for the nesting sites. Mishaps included physical nest problems, inattentive or inexperienced mothers, chick injuries and illness.

The nestminders were given the incredible responsibility to act immediately in any circumstance. Sometimes the weight of duty, where each bird, egg or chick represented a large percentage of the population, seemed heavy indeed.

The typical day started at 5pm, the time for the evening briefing and the evening feed -- a massive meal. Then volunteers head up the hill with a pack containing 12v battery, snacks, radio, various nest supplies, dry clothes and occasionally tools for tent site repairs. The trek started cold and breezy and ended sweaty, hot and wet.

I was assigned to Flossie, a wild-caught, older (30 years minimum and probably MUCH older) bird that had bred successfully and raised many chicks in the past. She was sitting on dummy eggs, as 2 of her 3 fertile eggs were being incubated back at the hut. One chick was hatched already and under a younger female. It took 1 1/2 hours through a pristine forest to reach Flossie's nest. One meter from the trail, human feet had never trod, trees never touched by human hands. The light beamed through the canopy onto ferns, lycopods, lichens and moss as soft as any mattress. Birds whistle and call, not another sound.



Fantails, bellbirds, riflemen, creepers, warblers dart unafraid through the forest. The red-front and yellow-front kakariki have ungainly babies just learning to fly and feed. The peaty waters along the boardwalk portions of the tract are a rich coffee color, and the fantails love to sit on the boards and catch emerging insects. The creeks flow in deep troughs. Fungi and mushrooms glow in the sunlight. The silence is deep and rich.

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The trail to Flossie's camp was a challenge with my heavy pack - steep and slick the last 50 meters. First thing at the tent the infra-red TV monitor is checked to see if she is at home. The nest is another 50 meters away, and linked by optics so that observations will not disturb the female. The battery that powers the recorder and monitor is changed, and then I settle in to a night of watching. By the first night I was thoroughly bonded to her. We were two of the oldest females on the island! She was so dedicated to her "eggs" and nest.

When the monitor "ding-dongs" (a sound that will be in my head forever) the female has left the nest, and I have to scurry down to the nest and monitor the chick's respiratory rate, weight, crop contents, hydration level; and apply a heating pad. This process can be repeated up to 5 times a night.

In the morning, the entire 24 hr previous period recording is reviewed and all activity is noted onto forms. Then it is back down the trail, 1 1/2 hr to the hut.

After turning in all the forms and exchanging batteries, I get a quick shower before checking on my "patients". I have been following a tiny chick with slow digestion, and Barnard, an older male with an injury in the under-wing area. Plus watching all the other chicks being fed, checking the beach, and bird-watching at the loo! Before I know it, it's 4 o'clock, time to pack up and start the day all over. By then the morning stiffness is gone and the old body is ready to trudge up the hill through paradise again.



It is a true paradise. There are no spines, thorns, stinging insects or other invertebrates, parasites. I have never seen an ant anywhere. It's cool, silent but for bird song and the bear-like trundling of the occasional kakapo through the bush. If there is an afterlife, it must be this forest.

Flossie gets a real egg!

What a thrill, the first adult kakapo I have seen--Flossie on her nest. She was big and beautiful. A very emotional moment for me and an awkward one for her. The hatch door was opened to place the pipping egg. So warm and so precious. Out went Flossie, in went the egg, out went the two dummy eggs. I burst into tears. What a miraculous moment. A true religious experience. We rushed away to give her space.

The bats are out tonight, beeping in the undergrowth. The nights on Whenua Hou are not quiet at all! Whereas in a tropical or North American forest the nights are filled with frog and insect noises, the nights on this lovely island are filled with bird calls. It is much noisier than the daytime. There are 3 or 4 species of petrels, owls, and kakapo. Then of course all the "diurnal" birds are up all night as well. The kaka (big rust-colored parrots) call, sing and fly all night; and the giant pigeons, the kereru, are so big that you can hear their wing beats and bodies hurling through the air.



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A special encounter

It was a long night in the tent, rainy and muddy, and Flossie was a little restless. The chick was growing by literal leaps, 10% gain at each weighing. And a very crabby little guy he was indeed. Grunting and complaining the whole time.

The highlight of the morning was to find volunteer Estelle, on her normal feed-out rounds, sitting on the ground with a kakapo copulating furiously on her arm. It was Sinbad, who had a go at me as well. I got to wrestle with him and play hippity-hop pounce games. Kakapo can really hop! Like cartoon parrots! And I feel much better now about my clumsy falls and slips in the forest, as Sinbad on a couple of enthusiastic hops slipped himself. Ah... the noble creatures of the forest. But what a great opportunity, to meet an adult kakapo on his own turf and on his own terms.

Meet Tiaho

I was privileged to meet the shy and lovable Tiaho near the hut's feeding station. He was very wary, but using the red light in my head lamp, he relaxed and started feeding. He was delicate about the pellets. Each was obviously precious. He would place the pellet cautiously on the ground, and chew small bites with the side of his beak. Tiny crumbs dribbled out, which he carefully ate. The few that were too tiny were polished up with an interesting method: Tiaho would use his great side whiskers to whisk-broom the crumbs, in a slow circular motion, into a line so as to lick up easier. A fascinating study of feeding behavior, and all in slow motion. I lay in the cold rain and mist on the path until I was nearly frozen solid. I talked to him, to tell him he was a good boy, and his eyes became heavier, heavier, closed. His head became heavier, heavier, down. And he fell fast asleep on the feeder platform.



I stayed as long as I could, just watching him sleep. The cold mist coalesced on his emerald plumage, forming water jewels and pearls on his feathers. A quiet, magical, spiritual moment. An inspiration.

Later I found out that Tiaho, a two year old male, almost died as a chick, was flown to the vet school in Massey University (North Palmerston) and was treated for life-threatening illness. He did recover and was released far from the hut. He walked across the island to live near the hut.

A crazy night in the tent

Luckily, Flossie is an experienced mom, and is very tidy about her chick. Other new mothers spew food all over the babies and cleanup by nestminders can be a huge job.

As her chick grows, there are more excursions. When Flossie's chick was little, she would go out for about 45 minutes, two or three times a night. Now it is 5-7 times a night! Little sleep for the nestminder.

The last night was a crazy night. Even though Flossie's nest is far from the sea, the waves were clearly audible. There were a number of kakapo around the site and near Flossie's feeding station, skarking in frustration because the hoppers would not work (they only open for the correct transmitter). Flossie was very restless all night. After the first visit to her nest, I was just drifting off to sleep when I heard soft pig-grunting near my tent.

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There was a small female kakapo, Pura, wandering around my tent. She was very shy, but finally came up. She spent quite some time with me, pumping my fingers and wanting me to massage her tongue. She seemed very hungry, so I gave her a few extra pellets. She then invited herself into my tent, checked things out, and fell asleep on my sleeping bag. She eventually left, and I heard a banshee cry outside the tent next to my ear. Kakapo number two invited himself in. It was Sinbad. He was fairly persistent about coming on in and being nosey. It was a dilemma, if I ran him off, he might harass Flossie and keep her from feeding, if I didn't, he would think tents were ok. I hustled him out, zipped up the tent and went to sleep.

I was woken up by sweet breath and whiskers tickling my face, and a gentle pinch to the eyebrow.

Sinbad had unzipped my tent and helped himself to a granola bar, and wanted a nice sleeping bag nest. He stayed most of the night, because I did not want to have him follow me to the nest. He was a pretty good boy, but right before dawn decided it was time for a quick copulation--and like any woman in the wee hours, who has been awoken after a late and sleepless night, the answer was "NO!" He finally left around 8 AM.



Last day at Whenua Hou

The last night on this enchanted island was blustery with rain and deepening mud, but beautiful and quiet nevertheless. The kakas were back with the evening serenade. Poor Sinbad made an indignant departure, he was captured and "taken for a walk". I heard his scream of dismay when they caught him down the hill. I know he was just hungry and lonely, But he had to go. He will have his very own bottomless feed hopper.

Flossie was so kind to allow me plenty of sleep on last night on Whenua Hou. She caught me once and waited impatiently while I packed up the heating pad and nestminder gear, and jumped right in before the hatch was closed. I returned early to the hut to prepare for the chopper flight. On the last descent of the muddy track, I found a pristine kakapo feather, my final farewell from the best parrot in the world.