

ENDEMIC SPECIES FEATURE

KORIMAKO OR MAKOMAKO

Bellbird

Anthornis melanura

The beautiful calls of bellbirds, also known as korimako and makomako, can be heard throughout the Brook Waimārama Sanctuary. Their voices are similar to that of a tui, though purer in tone and with fewer grunts, clicks and wheezes. Bellbirds and tui belong to a family of songbirds called honeyeaters, Meliphagidae. This is a large family comprised of 182 species, mostly found in Australia and New Guinea, but also scattered from Sulawesi to Samoa. Bellbirds and tui are the only honeyeaters found in New Zealand. It is thought that a common ancestor arrived in New Zealand from Australia 33 million years ago and bellbirds and tui diverged just under 3 million years ago.

Both bellbirds and tui have brush-tipped tongues well adapted for extracting nectar from flowers and sipping honeydew, which is excreted by scale insects living on beech trees. They also eat fruit and invertebrates. They play an important role in the pollination and seed dispersal of native trees.

Male bellbirds are olive green with bluish-black wing and tail feathers and a stylish purple tint on their heads. Notches on their outer primaries create a whirring noise during flight, often accentuated during territorial disputes. Notches on their outer primaries create a whirring noise during flight, often accentuated during territorial disputes. Females are browner with a subtle bluish tint on their heads and a white stripe across each cheek from the gape. Adults of both sexes have wine red eyes. Juveniles are much duller in colour, have brown eyes and white-yellow cheek stripes.

Breeding season extends from September to February. They usually mate with the same partner year after year and retain the same breeding territory. Females build deep untidy bowl-shaped nests, usually under dense vegetation in the fork of a tree or against its trunk. They lay between 2-4 eggs in each clutch and incubate them alone. The eggs hatch two weeks later. Both parents feed and care for the young. Chicks fledge at 11-20 days of age and are independent at roughly 40 days of age.

Outside of breeding season bellbirds may leave their breeding territory and travel alone in search of food, though it is not uncommon to find numerous bellbirds sharing a common food source.

When Europeans first arrived in New Zealand, bellbirds were common throughout the country, but unfortunately their numbers have declined, especially in Northland, due to a combination of deforestation, competition with possums for nectar and possibly disease. They are found in both native and regenerating forests, pine forests and urban gardens if suitable habitat is nearby.

Bellbirds have benefited greatly from the pest eradication in the Sanctuary at the end of 2017. Counts of bellbirds in five-minute bird counts have increased every year since. They are now more than twice as abundant than in 2017.

Written by:

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