

ENDEMIC SPECIES FEATURE

KERERŪ

New Zealand pigeon *Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*

The kererū, also known as the New Zealand pigeon, kūkū and kūkupa, is more than just a gentle and beautiful bird. It also plays a vital role in the spread and regeneration of native trees. Since the extinction of moa, native pigeons are the only birds able to swallow whole the large fruits of miro, tawa, karaka, pūriri, taraire and mātai. The seeds are then dispersed intact in their droppings. Kererū also supplement their diet with leaves, buds and flowers, as fruits and berries are not always available.

Breeding takes place from September to March and is kicked off with fantastic flight displays. A favourite stunt is to fly vertically, then stall and dive. Kererū lay one egg in their flimsy shallow nests. Both parents share the 28-day job of incubation. They may have up to 3 successful broods per season. When food is plentiful, a pair may have an egg in one nest and a chick in another. Chicks are fed 'pigeon-milk', a protein-rich secretion from the walls of their parents' crops, and when older, regurgitated fruit pulp. Apparently, pigeons, doves, Emperor penguins and flamingos are the only birds known to produce crop-milk. Parents continue to feed the fledging well after it has left the nest. It may even remain with its parents for several months.

For the most part, they are quiet birds. You may hear them 'coo' or the swishing of their wings as they fly, but often you may simply encounter one sitting silently in a tree. Within pest-free islands and mainland sanctuaries, they may live up to 15 years. Without, predation and illegal hunting greatly diminishes their average lifespan to 3-6 years. We have already lost two other species of native pigeons, one each on Raoul Island and Norfolk Island, which became extinct in the 1800's, and we came close to losing the Chatham Island pigeon (*Hemiphaga chathamensis*). Thanks to conservation efforts, the Chatham Island pigeon made a dramatic recovery from 40 individuals in 1990 to about 500 today. Fortunately, kererū are not threatened, but we must never be complacent.

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Photo credit: Katherine Chamberlain



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