

Kereru, kukupa, wood pigeon (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*)

Introduction:

The wood pigeon, or kereru as it is commonly known, is one of New Zealand's most impressive species of bird. Distinctive due to their size and coloration, kereru occur throughout New Zealand with a second, distinct subspecies occurring on the Chatham Islands. A closely related subspecies of wood pigeon used to occur on Norfolk Island until its demise in the early 1800's. On the mainland they are most common in the King Country, Nelson and in the forests of the West Coast. It is not unusual for a number of kereru to be found flocked together in the same fruiting tree where they can be observed gorging themselves on fruit.



Vital Statistics:

Kereru can expect to live for up to 15 years on offshore islands where there is limited threat from predators. On the mainland their life expectancy is greatly reduced and may only be 5-7 years. Kereru can breed year round but more commonly coincide their laying with the appearance of fruit. Often kereru will not breed in years when fruit supply is poor. Normally they only lay a single egg each year.

What makes it unique?

The kereru is arguably New Zealand's most important species of forest bird. It is one of very few large, native forest dwellers New Zealand has and plays a vital role in the dispersal of many of the large fleshy fruits common in our forests. Species such as karaka, miro, matai, taraire, tawa, and puriri rely solely on the kereru for dispersal of their fleshy fruits. In areas where kereru numbers are low so too is forest diversity. Kereru are also important dispersers of titoki, kohekohe and nikau fruit.

Conservation:

In recent times it has been found that kereru numbers are in serious decline as a result of both competition and illegal poaching. Competition - with other, more aggressive, bird species (such as magpies) and also with possums - is a problem facing the future conservation of kereru. Possums actively compete with the birds for food (particularly fruit). Predators such as stoats, ferrets, weasels and rats kill a large number of kereru and, combined with an ever expanding weed flora impinging on prime habitat, has had a major impact on kereru numbers.