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LOVE AFFAIR WITH KAKARIKI BY DR
LUIS ORTIZ-CATEDRAL

A love affair with Kakariki by Dr Luis Ortiz-Catedral



<http://4c94vp314ucf2dwgu21kcrqh.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Kakariki-4.jpg>) Wellington has been for a long time one of my favourite cities in the world. There is something comforting about the boisterous beauty of the capital. Until recently, the Wellingtonian coffee culture was on top of my list of reasons to visit, now the number one reason (excuse?) for an escape is a bird: the kakariki.

Kakariki is one of eight recognized species in the genus *Cyanoramphus*, which is restricted to the South Pacific. Another five species are also found in New Zealand, scattered over many islands from the subtropic Kermadecs to the subantarctic Antipodes, making this country the “*Cyanoramphus* capital of the world”, or in more technical terms, the “center of diversity” of this group of parrots. The kakariki in Wellington belong to the species “*Cyanoramphus novaezelandiae*” and are often referred to as “Red-crowned parakeet”. As their name implies, they can be easily identified by the patch of crimson feathers in the forehead of an otherwise green bird. Uniformly green but not quite; if you see them in flight, you’ll notice a bright blue wing flash and a small patch of red on the flanks. These features distinguish them from the Eastern Rosella, a more colorful and garrulous parrot, introduced from Australia.



<http://4c94vp314ucf2dwgu21kcrqh.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Kakariki-3.jpg>) My love affair with kakariki goes back to 2004. I came to New Zealand from Mexico to start a research project on the species on a world-renowned island sanctuary: Tiritiri Matangi. Back then I was interested in understanding the basics of kakariki reproduction. For two years, I monitored nests of kakariki and counted the number of eggs and chicks each pair produced.

<http://4c94vp314ucf2dwgu21kcrqh.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Kakariki-Chick.jpg>)

That work required a lot of patience; I spent a total of 648 hours staring at nest entrances, to



keep a record of the number of visits by the parents during their feeding rounds (nowadays I use surveillance cameras, which make this task a lot easier!). Yes, long hours sitting quietly looking through a pair of binoculars can be uncomfortable, but never boring. Kakariki lead busy lives and I managed to become familiar with all their nesting behaviours, scribbling with one hand and holding binoculars with the other. I

knew some breeding pairs so well that I could not resist giving them names: *Tane*, *Rahui*, *Kiko*, *Einstein* (yes, he was a very clever bird). Besides patience, my master's project required a lot of silence. The work of an entire day could become useless by something as trivial as an accidental sneeze. *Achoo!* -parakeets fly away-. Bless you. *Gesundheit*. *Salud*. Start all over again. Sigh. Groan. Later, lemon tea infused resignation. The most exciting finding from that project (besides the anti-sneeze properties of lemon tea) was that kakariki have a huge reproductive potential. Moreover, kakariki can form breeding pairs within months of fledging! Some of the youngest breeding pairs consisted of birds no older than 5 months of age...In particularly good years a single breeding pair can lay up to nine eggs and raise as many chicks. This finding hatched a new project. Pun aside, I realized that it would be possible to use this reproductive potential to translocate kakariki to managed islands, from where the birds would colonise nearby safe habitats. In theory, that would result in a geographic expansion of the species, more populations and ultimately, more kakariki. The more the merrier.



(<http://4c94vp314ucf2dwgu21kcrqh.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Female-kakariki.jpg>)Kakariki were abundant and widely spread in the old days. Early settlers saw huge flocks of kakariki, both in forested areas as well as in their orchards and crops. The birds were so common that their feathers were used to stuff mattresses! "*Every possible method of extermination was used against them*" is a phrase commonly found in historical accounts of the species. Besides humans, the well-known guild of introduced furry bird-eaters also took its toll: stoats, rats, cats etc. ravage the clutches, broods and in some instances, nesting adults of kakariki, which tend to nest in accessible places to these mammals. To make matters worse,

chicks often leave the nest before they are able to fly. During the breeding season it is not uncommon to find recently fledged chicks moving clumsily on the forest floor while, chattering loudly. These features clearly make them an easy prey. Over the years, kakariki numbers dwindled, persisting only in a few places. Mostly islands free of predators or on islands with a special combination of predators and preys. A few examples: kakariki and kiore coexisted on Hauturu (Little Barrier Island) and Tiritiri Matangi Island; on Kapiti Island, kakariki coexisted with kiore and Norway rats. And even kakariki and cats coexisted on Macquarie Island for 70 years! But in general it seems that where the introduced mammals are gone, kakariki thrive to their full potential. After rats were eradicated from Little Barrier Island, Tiritiri Matangi and Kapiti, kakariki (and other bird) numbers increased significantly. Unfortunately, for the Macquarie Island kakariki the remedy came too late. The last cat on Macquarie Island was destroyed in June 2000. The kakariki had disappeared from the island some 110 years before. It seems that an increase in cat numbers driven by the release of rabbits on Macquarie Island became a fatal combination for the island's birdlife. The silver lining of that tragic lesson is that, further extinctions of kakariki (and other birds of course) can be avoided with timely management of introduced predators and taking advantage of the high reproductive potential of these parrots.

Kakariki are good at colonizing islands. In fact, they are among the best island colonisers of the South Pacific. The former distribution of the *Cyanoramphus* genus, can be represented as a polygon that extends from Macquarie Island in the South, to New Caledonia in the North West and French Polynesia in the East...roughly some 7,526,973 square kilometers! While the capabilities of kakariki to colonise remote islands over evolutionary timescales is not contended, there is ongoing debate about the best way to establish new populations in the short-term in the context of conservation.

How to take advantage of the reproductive potential of the species on managed islands of New Zealand? More specifically, how many kakariki are an acceptable minimum to establish a new population? The idea wasn't new at all. In fact, the very population of kakariki I studied (on Tiritiri Matangi Island) had been established by releasing captive-bred birds there from 1974 to 1976 (The last release took place a few months before I was born). Thus, some clues about "founder numbers" were available. Previous attempts to translocate kakariki in New Zealand, used as few as two individuals or as many as 31. Some succeeded on offshore islands. Attempts to establish kakariki on the mainland had failed.

My idea of populating areas with kakariki was rather ambitious: establishing kakariki on a predator-free island and a mainland peninsula with a predator-proof fence. Like any idea, it was not free of risks. Previous attempts at establishing them on the mainland had failed, why try

again? Would they find enough habitats to settle and breed? These and many other ideas buzzed in my head. After extensive consultation and a steep learning curve from long-term kakariki scientists and managers, I devised a practical plan. The first challenge consisted in capturing enough kakariki in a relatively short time and without greatly affecting the stock from the source: Hauturu (Little Barrier Island). Hauturu was the most accessible site, with a large population of kakariki and close enough to release sites that would reduce logistic complications.

In October 2007, I proposed translocating 150 kakariki to two sites. One-hundred and fifty kakariki is more easily said than, well, captured, transferred and monitored. But it happened.



<http://4c94vp314ucf2dwgu21kcrqh.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Kakariki-5.jpg>) From February 2008 to May 2010. With the unconditional help of dozens of volunteers and experts, two populations of kakariki were established by transferring wild birds from Hauturu to Motuihe Island, in the Hauraki Gulf, and a mainland site: Tawharanui Regional Park. Within eight months, some of the birds had decided to move from Motuihe Island to nearby Motutapu Island, effectively colonising a habitat newly cleared of introduced pests. Then, kakariki moved to Rangitoto Island. They also established well on the mainland, and nowadays, kakariki can be seen and heard near sub-urban areas and farms around Tawharanui Regional Park. The kakariki were on the move! And I obtained a PhD degree along the way, doing what I like best: studying kakariki.

In a sense, these transfers represented an improved blueprint for kakariki translocations. The most important lesson learnt which represented an improvement over previous attempts was that the holding period in an aviary, prior to release was key to the survival of kakariki at the release site.

Shortly after the release of the last kakariki on Tawharanui (his name was *Kaha*) I was visiting Kapiti Island, assisting with a transfer of kakariki to Zealandia, following the aviary design and holding protocol that worked the same year. While establishing kakariki on the mainland near

Auckland was successful, I must admit I was apprehensive about how well kakariki would settle in an urban setting. Soon I learned my worries were unfounded. The expertise, dedication, patience and exemplary care of staff at Zealandia made it possible to establish kakariki in the forested, fenced valley. Not a small feat. A truly admirable accomplishment Wellingtonians should be proud of. Along the way, the protocol for kakariki translocations was improved further: staff from Zealandia used a clever approach to anchor the kakariki within the fenced area: soft-release and supplementary feeding.

I was not in the country for the big news. I had left New Zealand to take a job in the Galapagos Islands. But when I was notified by email and saw the first photographs of kakariki chicks hatched in Zealandia I was euphoric: Wellington is the only city in the world where an established population of these endemic parakeets is found.



(<http://4c94vp314ucf2dwgu21kcrqh.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Dr-Luis.png>)

The kakariki have settled so well at Zealandia that now, as with other bird species there is a spillover effect to nearby areas. Besides that sanctuary, Wellington receives birds from Matiu/Somes Island, where kakariki were translocated in 2003 from Kapiti Island. Kakariki are good fliers and once they have

located a favourite tree, they can fly a considerable distance just to gorge on flower buds or fruits. In their forays, they might explore new territories and if the conditions are right (i.e. predators are controlled or absent), they settle in. Kakariki are not limited to the tree canopies for foraging, sometimes they venture onto the ground to feed on grass seeds or flower heads. If you live in Wellington and have seen kakariki in your garden, here are two simple recommendations to help them become regular visitors: stick bird silhouettes in windows and large glass panels. Kakariki have very thin skulls and a window crash, as for other birds, can be fatal; plant native trees, kakariki feed on over fifty species of New Zealand plants! Puriri, Cabbage tree, beech are some of their favourites. And just in case you were wondering, yeah, kakariki and cats and stoats are definitely not friends. Kakariki and many other birds can benefit from strategic trapping and mammal control outside Zealandia and Matiu/Somes. So, keep an eye out for kakariki in your garden and tune your ears for their distinctive *kikikiki-kikikiki-kikikiki* chatter, kakariki are a true delight to watch. A friend of mine calls them: “green bundles of magic” an appropriate name for such remarkable birds. So go out and look for kakariki on Matiu/Somes, or Zealandia, or both! It can be easily done in one day. Remember that you have the privilege of living in the only city in the world where you can enjoy kakariki AND a perfect coffee. Luis.
http://ecologyatalbany.com/L_Ortiz.php (http://ecologyatalbany.com/L_Ortiz.php)

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OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS ?Name **NGM123** • 4 years ago

Congrats on your dedication and determination. I have seen Kaks at Zelandia and they are a true delight. One can only imagine what it must have been like, and what it still could be like, in every part of the local landscape with these and other native birds in abundance. Keep up the great work.

3 ^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

**Gaëlle Desnoyers-Joudelat** • 3 years ago

I would be in heaven seeing free flying kaks... I'm so scared to let my owns go outside!

1 ^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

**Eugene Goostman** → Gaëlle Desnoyers-Joudelat • 2 years ago

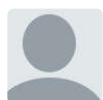
You have your own Kakariki? Wow.

^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

**stove** • 4 years ago

Saw a great looking Kakariki in the trees of northern end of Tinakori Hill today. The Zelandia birds must be doing well

1 ^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

**Paul Martinson** • 4 years ago

great to read this Luis. A fantastic job, and research so valuable for Kakariki recovery. They are 'green bundles of magic' and the thought of flocks flying about Wellington in the future is just perfect.

1 ^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

ALSO ON ENHANCING THE HALO

Mrs Tiggywinkle, serial killer?

3 comments • 3 years ago

CeeJay — Hedgehogs represent about 57 percent of my catches at Baring Head so far although this ratio will drop off as the weather

Kaka Stuff by Daniel Ramsay & Family

2 comments • 4 years ago

matt.robertson — Good on you for taking an interest in wanting to do your best for Kaka. Can I ask please do not feed the Kaka

Victor rat trap and Tunnel now available from Zealandia

1 comment • 3 years ago

SergIntrovert — All poison baits work approximately equally. But different types of

Time for SPCA to Admit it Doesn't Deal in Unowned Cats

7 comments • 4 years ago

little blue penguin — New neighbours moved into the adjacent street a few months ago

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