

SULPHUR-CRESTED COCKATOOS NEAR HUNTERVILLE

In 1907 four Sulphur-crested Cockatoos were brought from Australia to Turakina (near Wanganui) in a wire cage. Apparently overnight the birds clipped through the wire with their strong broad beaks, and flew to freedom, making their way up the Turakina Valley, inland towards Mangahoe, near Hunterville. The district they chose apparently suited them, because in 1911 there were eleven.

The Turakina river runs approximately south-west through the area. It runs in a fairly wide and deep valley, from which numerous gulleys branch out. The countryside is predominantly hilly, with the only flat-lands near the rivers. Native bush borders the Turakina river and its tributaries and is found on the sheltered sides and floors of many gulleys. Near the farm homesteads are patches of pine, macrocarpa and willows. The dominant trees of the native bush canopy, which the cockatoos frequent are rimu, kahikatea, totara, rewa-rewa, hinau and matai.

Since 1911 they have settled in well, and there are now reputed to be about 400 birds scattered up the Turakina Valley and around Mangahoe.

Farmers in the district have seen flocks of eighty birds strip green trees within a few hours, and small flocks from 6-12 birds have been seen inland from Hunterville, near the Rangitikei River.

On 22/8/61 at Mangahoe, we noticed several birds in pairs, suggesting the beginning of the nesting season.

We spent from 14-24th January, 1962, trying to trace and understand their nesting and feeding habits. First we attempted to stalk the birds to study their feeding, but for every flock there was a sentry bird whose screeching warning defeated us continually. We found that the only way was to arrive at the macrocarpa trees before them, conceal ourselves and wait. First a bird reconnoitred the trees and settled; later the flock followed. With the aid of a telescope and fieldglasses we noticed the smooth, even majestic method in which the birds fed. By using their strong beaks they plucked the macrocarpa nuts; noisily broke them open and ate the black shiny seeds inside, discarding the shells, so that the ground underneath the trees was littered with them.

According to local inhabitants, the birds choose tall dead kahikatea trees in which to make their nests. We found three such trees containing nests, but could not at any time explore them because of their height and sheer sides. We decided to chop one down to find what the nest was made of and its measurements, etc., but were disappointed in that the tree when cut through stood on the stump leaning against other smaller trees beside it. We did notice that the parent birds made a change-over about every $1\frac{1}{4}$ hours. A flock of birds would circle around nearby trees screaming and suddenly three or four would leave the main flock and alight on the nesting tree, making no noise at all. After a few minutes one of the birds would begin moving slowly towards the nest hole, sometimes taking three or four minutes to complete the manoeuvre. Suddenly it would duck inside and a few seconds later a bird (whether the same one or not could not be confirmed) would emerge, fly to a dead branch and after preening for several seconds would fly with the other three or four to the main flock, which would wheel several times around the vicinity and flap off to some macrocarpa trees in another valley.

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