

SHORT NOTE

SIGHTING OF SOUTH ISLAND KOKAKO (*Callaeas cinerea cinerea*) IN MOUNT ASPIRING NATIONAL PARK

For several years from about 1957, I went down to Mt Albert Station, then owned by Mr John Quaife, to help with the autumn cattle muster, usually in late March and early April. The calves duly weaned and the sale lot on their way to Cromwell, I would go up into the Teal Creek valley for a few days of deer shooting. The track, a seldom-used blazed trail, led steeply up the north side of the valley through thick silver beech forest with little understorey and a scattering of totara.

As I climbed and returned I would always come upon areas of the mossy forest floor that had been recently disturbed, and rotting tree trunks and branches that had been picked at and underdug. I suspected kaka but saw no other sign.

On my visit to Teal Creek in 1964, I heard what I described to my hosts as a rather exalted Tui, followed by the harsh and prolonged cry of a falcon, then silence. Mrs Quaife, who had heard of their possible previous existence in the area, suggested Kokako, but I didn't give much credence to it.

The following year, still intrigued by the "ploughing," I took more care to travel quietly and, on my way down, spent an hour or so just listening. I was rewarded by hearing the same Tui-like sounds from two different directions, and did see movement of what appeared to be a largish bird in the tree tops from whence one song came. Again a falcon came screaming down the valley and all sounds ceased.

The next year (1966), I missed the muster and paid my visit in early May. I was coming quietly down the trail and stopped to ease my shoulders by resting my pack, which was loaded with venison, on a convenient rock. Presently, I realised I was looking straight at a strange bird perching on a branch 15-20 metres away. It was just below the canopy of a beech downslope from me, about 15 metres above the ground but horizontally only about 3 metres above me. It seemed to be quietly singing to itself as its head and beak were constantly moving and I heard an occasional note, but with a gusty wind rustling the leaves and the river roaring below, it was hard to tell if the song was continuous. The light was not good, but I could see detail quite well. It was facing directly towards me, the tip of its tail visible below the 10-cm-thick branch. It was dark grey with jet black head and beak. One could imagine it was wearing a mask! Its wattles, which were quite prominent, were putty coloured, just a light fawn, but it was undoubtedly a Kokako.

I tried to ease out of my pack straps to get at my camera, but the bird immediately hopped into the upper branches and disappeared.

I was fairly sure I heard a snatch of song from another direction, but just then a falcon screamed down near the river and, apart from an occasional call from that, I heard nothing more. The position was NZMS 1 Map S107 Grid 968687.

The following year (April 1967), I was within 400 metres of the previous sighting, and close to a patch of "ploughed" ground which I had seen on my way up the valley about six days before. It was a fine afternoon, no wind, the only sound being the roar of the river just below. I had stopped to listen, propped against a tree for only a few minutes, when a Kokako appeared walking along a log which protruded from a thick patch of fern beside a patch of "ploughed" ground. I think it saw me immediately because it quickened its pace, flew from the end of the log to a sloping tree trunk a short distance below, and began to climb the trunk in a most peculiar way. With each rather ungainly step upwards, it appeared to hold on to the bark with its beak, look in my direction, take another step, hold, look, and so on until it reached the branches, when it hopped rapidly out of sight. I was fairly certain I saw two largish birds moving in the canopy nearby, but as a small flock of parakeets was moving through just then, I could not be sure. I had to hurry on then, as it is not a place one would care to be benighted in.

The following day I took Mrs Quaife up to the spot, but in 3-4 hours we saw and heard nothing except the inevitable falcon.

I had informed the resident park ranger at Wanaka of my sighting the previous year, and again jogged his memory. The Park Board eventually flew in a hut to a nearby clearing, and spent some time in an unsuccessful search.

My next and last trip (1968) was also without sighting except of the falcon.

K. McBRIDE, *Kawarau Downs, RD4, Kaikoura*



SOUTH ISLAND KOKAKO (*Callaeas cinerea cinerea*) IN *Nothofagus* FOREST

By M. N. CLOUT and J. R. HAY

The location of a 1967 sighting of South Island Kokako (*Callaeas cinerea cinerea*) in beech (*Nothofagus*) forest at Mount Aspiring National Park was searched, without success, in May 1981. Early literature on South Island Kokako shows that they commonly inhabited beech forest and had ground-feeding and low-nesting habits which made them vulnerable to introduced mammalian predators. It is suggested that the dramatic irruptions of rodents and stoats (*Mustela erminea*) that occur after beech 'mast' years in the South Island may have contributed to the rapid decline of *C. c. cinerea*.