

# New Zealand's Parrot Prank

In New Zealand's highlands, pesky birds have the last laugh.

by Eric Hoffman

At the Homer Saddle mountain pass on New Zealand's South Island a large tourist bus sits idling near the entrance of Homer Tunnel. The tunnel leads to Milford Sound on a road that hugs granite cliffs as it drops precipitously through the spectacularly steep and waterfall-strewn rainforests of the Cheddau Valley. With its ruggedness, mist-shrouded forests, and snow-capped peaks, the region is one of the wildest places on earth.

A stiff southeasterly wind spits ice crystals in the faces of underdressed tourists, only a few of whom venture from the bus to snap a picture of the barren landscape before clambering back on board. They are oblivious to several nondescript, crow-sized, olive-green birds rummaging nearby through an overflowing trash can.

The birds belong to a species called the kea (*Nestor notabilis*), a maverick member of the parrot family, described as everything from a fun-loving prankster to a heartless mountain mobster that knows no bounds when it comes to procuring a meal. Indigenous to the high country of South Island, the bird is loved by many and hated by some, and its antics frequently solicit moralistic comparisons to human misbehavior.

As the big tour bus revs its engine and pulls back onto the roadway, one of the keas breaks off its search for discarded junk food and glides to the bus's windshield, alights on the windshield wiper, cocks its head sideways, and peers at the driver. The driver blasts his horn but the kea stays put. The driver guns his engine and enters the tunnel, accelerating to about 40 miles per hour. The bird still hangs on as it is buffeted by the wind. The driver mutters to no one in particular, "Watch, he'll let go now"—and as if on cue, the kea lets go and sails over the top of the bus like a candy bar wrapper. The bird can be seen flapping its way back toward the tunnel entrance to rejoin its family group sorting through the trash.

"Keas like to have fun, and they express play in many different ways. When it comes to behavior, there is no other bird like them. They are cunning, calculating, and highly intelligent," says Wayne Schulenburg, animal-care manager for the bird collection at the San Diego Zoo. Schulenburg has firsthand knowledge of keas both in captive settings and in the alpine wilds of New Zealand.



John Carmichael/DRK Photo

In New Zealand, just when you've heard the most unbelievable kea story, there is always another one. Keas demolishing automobiles is a recurring topic. Hikers leaving cars in ski resorts or trailheads sometimes return to find their windshield wipers shredded and a couple of keas dragging the remains around the parking lot. Or a mischievous pair

of keas may leave the windshield wipers alone and instead make a day of prying off chrome strips.

One of the most often told kea yarns concerns a group of Japanese tourists who returned to a rental car after a day at a ski resort. The keas had so thoroughly torn out the rubber strip around the car's windshield that the windshield had fallen in, creating an opportunity no self-respecting kea would pass up—the chance to enter a human structure and trash it. Usually the narrator describes the scene as follows: The shocked, hapless tourists, mouths agape, stand silently as a group of keas play in the snow with clothing, food stuffs, and car parts. The birds stand amid their booty, absorbed in pushing an empty Coke can this way and that in what vaguely looks like a soccer match. When the tourists approach, the birds nonchalantly retreat to the roof of a nearby car and stand watching in curious bemusement.

Nobody seems to know exactly where and when this incident occurred, but everyone, from highland sheep farmers to scientists studying keas, believes it honestly reflects how keas behave. "They embrace each day with curiosity, mischief, and the desire to eat," says Graeme Elliot, an ornithologist and kea expert for the Department of Conservation on South Island. "For some reason keas love to destroy foam. When someone leaves open a car window in the mountains, it's not uncommon for a kea or two to enter and pull the upholstery apart. In ski resorts they're notorious for flying off with someone's gloves when his head is turned. They definitely delight in mischief."

**Opposite: The keas of New Zealand's South Island are known for their playful, inquisitive natures.**

**Above: At times, their pranks take on a destructive and, to humans, decidedly annoying aspect—especially when it comes to unguarded automobiles.**



sters





**Keas mate for life and share in chick-raising responsibilities. Family groups stay together for about a year, until young birds develop survival techniques.**



*Tui DeRoy/Minden Pictures*

Their curiosity and boldness suit keas well. Broad-spectrum omnivores, they characteristically use a broad-minded approach to procuring a meal. In a single day a group of keas might gorge on snowberries in a mountain meadow, then fly to a nearby garbage dump and look for fat-laden foods that they learn to recognize by the containers' labeling. They spend a lot of time on the ground, slowly walking and observing, and have a propensity to investigate openings. The birds generally nest in rocky crevices among giant boulders.

The sight of keas slowly walking through a mutton bird colony may look entirely harmless until one parrot suddenly descends into a mutton bird's subterranean nesting chamber and pulls out an unprotected chick, which is killed and eaten by the group.

"Keas are slow and methodical but always ready to make the most of an opportunity," remarks Elliot. They like everything people eat, putting the bird squarely in competition with humans. With an open and flexible mind, a kea may include in its day a raid of a garbage bin, a venture down a chimney into a pantry, or a tent-ripping invasion to sample a bushwalker's fruit.

Although many kinds of animals will pilfer a food bin, given the opportunity, "with keas there's an expression of joy and mischief that sets them apart," says U.S.-based ornithologist Richard Olsen. Usually, once inside a car, house, tent, or mountain hut, they trash the place.

Sometimes they display an almost humanlike ability to avoid culpability. Schulenburg likes to tell the story of Lucy, a particularly clever kea who lived for years at the San Diego Zoo. "She figured out how to break open the lock to her cage. One night she got loose and entered the keeper's quarters and the kitchen. She ate everything edi-

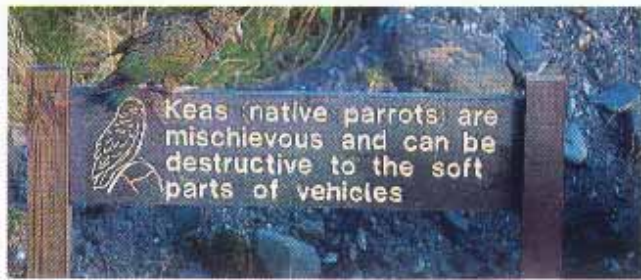
ble, totally destroyed a down sleeping bag, and carried coffee mugs to the edge of the counter and dropped them to the floor, reducing the mugs to a pile of pottery shards. Another night she escaped and methodically opened 20 other cages containing dozens of other species of birds that were part of special breeding programs. In the morning, when we came to work, we couldn't believe our eyes. Most of the birds were gleefully zooming around in areas that had been taboo. Lucy played it innocent. She and her mate had gone back to their cage and shut the door behind them, but the telltale broken lock gave away who was behind the breakout."

In South Island's wilds keas never sit idle for long. One is known to have made sport of a woman putting out the daily laundry. Within minutes after she hung it up, the kea would glide down, perch on the clothesline, and walk along, prying open each clothespin so that the damp laundry dropped to the ground. When the last piece fell, the bird flew off, only to return the next day.

The various highland hiking tracks on South Island are a fairly common locale for kea rascality. Warnings are often posted that tell of a tent broken into or of a bold kea that approached a resting hiker to tug on his shoelace until the knot pulled apart.

Allison Archambault, a U.S. veterinarian specializing in parrot medicine, has had a few encounters with the opportunistic and predatory nature of keas while visiting her family in New Zealand. When a fierce storm from the Subantarctic overtook Archambault and her friends, they faced a grueling hike over a precipitous icy trail to reach safety. "I fell several times, became disoriented, and actually feared I might not survive. When I glanced behind, I found it sobering to find five keas quietly walking along behind me only a few feet away. They recognized I was in





## Just when you've heard the most unbelievable kea story, there is always another one.

trouble and saw me as a potential meal, just as they do sheep that wander into their highland haunts during the harsh winter months." She lived to tell her tale and the keas were out a meal, but such brazenness and ability to size up a situation and capitalize on it have put the parrots in direct conflict with sheep farmers.

For years highland sheep growers' declarations that keas kill sheep were often discounted as exaggerations. After all, how can a bird that weighs only a couple pounds kill and eat a full-grown sheep? Ornithologists thought that stories of sheep predation were actually instances of scavenging. Nevertheless, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the kea was so thoroughly accepted as a serious predator in New Zealand that the government put a bounty on the bird's head, and the species was hunted with a specially designed "kea gun." The policy resulted in the deaths of more than 150,000 keas. Not until 1970 was the bounty lifted.

Since 1986 keas have enjoyed the full protection of the New Zealand government, although the sheep-kea conflict promises to present itself anew now that TV New Zealand's *Kea, Mountain Parrot* video has documented firsthand accounts of the parrots' descending on sheep in the pitch-dark of night. They'd walk among a herd of sheep and one would eventually hop onto a sheep's hindquarters and slowly dig through the fleece, stopping to look about from time to time. Eventually the kea would work its way to the sheep's flesh and dig into the fatty areas around the kidneys. Often the sheep died outright or a fatal infection set in.

Still, the number of sheep lost each year is relatively small and often localized. "This appears to be learned behavior," comments Elliot. "In some places with both keas and sheep, there are no attacks. In other places, there are. We tell farmers to think of keas operating in their areas as acts of God, like good or bad weather. We don't want farmers killing birds indiscriminately. So we ask them to report problems to us. If we confirm there is a problem, the government is responsible for removing the problem bird."

If you, too, find yourself judging keas on human terms and view their taste for mutton as sinister, there is a flip side. Kea family life is nothing less than exemplary. "Mated pairs bond for life. Both parents work at raising their chicks and show an unusual level of sensitivity in rearing their young," says Elliot. Unlike many avian species that allow their weak young to be discarded or

thrown from the nest, keas pamper an undersized chick, even lifting its head to force-feed if it is too weak to eat on its own. Family groups often stay together for a year or more as the young birds learn how to survive. They also often play together, wrestling and tumbling for hours.

The obvious question is, Why is this parrot species so smart? Olsen hazards a theory: "The kea represents a link with the ancient evolutionary past and is an omnivorous parrot—not a specialized feeder as is the case with most parrots living today. Its brain is a distinguishing attribute that gives it the edge in a harsh world."

Elliot concurs: "The kea is a generalist with a good brain that allow it flexibility. The beak is not especially well suited for cracking nuts. It's more of a general-use tool for probing, digging, and experimentation."

*continued on page 38*



Mark Jones/Minerals Pictures

**Its large size—about a foot and a half long—and broad-spectrum eating habits distinguish the kea among parrots.**





Cyndy Patrick

## Unappetizing Actions

I would like to thank *Animals* and writer Mark Jerome Walters for bringing to my attention the serious declines in sturgeon populations ("The Cruellest Delicacy," *Unsung Survivors*, November/December 1998). It concerns me that human beings are so willing to kill any ani-

mal if it suits their purpose. The only reason the sturgeon is being killed is so we can have a so-called delicacy.

All life should have more value and should not be endangered just because humans think that eating a species' eggs is more important than keeping the species alive. In the end everyone will suffer from our lack of compassion for animals. We live here, too, and our actions have a circular effect. What we do to this planet and the animals on it will come back around to us.

Alison Ely  
Wilmington, DE

## Moved by Seals

I just wrote to the Canadian minister of foreign affairs asking that his country stop the excessive killing of seals ("A New Side to an Old Debate," *Animals Talk*, January/February 1999). I let him know we are the wardens of the earth, and all things on earth.

We need to restrict our greed and shortsightedness and learn to compromise. Yes, we need jobs, but without trees we cannot log. Without good waters—no fishing; without clean air—no healthy breathing.

Thank you for your magazine. I wish more people could read it and get involved. Please continue the good uplifting stories along with the facts-of-life story lines. We need good stories to know we are making a difference.

Martha Russell  
Carmel, ME

## Fight for Lab Animals

I was deeply disturbed by the article about animals living in pain and dying in cold steel cages ("The Next Frontier," *Animals* 2000, September/October 1998). Is there any way I can help besides not buying animal-tested products?

Eden C. Miller  
Saraland, AL

# Keas

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With a 2.5 million-year history behind it, it appears that the kea's future is bright. "For the most part, the population seems stable at between 5,000 and 10,000 birds," says Elliot, "but there are a few dangers that need to be watched. Keas experiment in food choices, which sometimes gets them in trouble. I know of birds dying from ingesting rubber and other man-made products. Members of the weasel family, especially stoats introduced from the United Kingdom years ago, have proliferated and kill a fair number of our ground-nesting birds, which include the kea. But the species has stood the test of time so far, and it would be hard to imagine a New Zealand without keas."

*Freelance writer Eric Hoffman, based in Santa Cruz, California, writes frequently on nature subjects and ecotourism.*

*Editor's Note:* For more information call or write: The Center for Laboratory Animal Welfare, Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals/American Humane Education Society, 350 South Huntington Ave., Boston, MA 02130; (617) 522-7400.

## Correction

The StripedCat letter holder featured in our January/February 1999 issue (*Trading Post*) listed an incorrect price. The correct price is \$18.95. *Animals* apologizes for any inconvenience caused by this error.

## What's Your Opinion?

*Animals is pleased to offer its letters page as our readers' forum on the issues and topics we cover. Write to: Letters, Animals, MSPCA, 350 South Huntington Ave., Boston, MA 02130; fax: (617) 522-4885; e-mail: letters@animalsmagazine.com. Letters may be edited for space and clarity.*



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