

SPECIES ON THE BRINK

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The endearing kākāpō is staging a bit of a comeback, thanks to a painstakingly managed conservation effort

What is a kākāpō?

To quote my great friend, the late Douglas Adams [author of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*], it is “the world's largest, fattest and least-able-to-fly parrot”. The running joke is that it has forgotten it has forgotten how to fly: it climbs up trees and leaps into the air, flapping its wings, but at best manages a controlled plummet and then lands in a graceless heap on the ground. Otherwise known as the night parrot or owl parrot, it comes out when it's dark and has an endearing, owl-like face. It even has a song resembling an unreleased collection of Pink Floyd studio outtakes. There is nothing else quite like it.

Where does it live?

New Zealand. There used to be hundreds of thousands of kākāpō throughout the country. Early explorers described being able to shake a tree until they tumbled to the ground, like apples. But they had disappeared from North Island by about 1930 and persisted in parts of South Island only until the late 1980s. A population of 150 birds was discovered on Stewart Island in 1977, but they were disappearing fast.

Why the decline?

New Zealand has no native predatory mammals. But since people started arriving 700 years ago, bringing a menagerie of different creatures with them – some on purpose, and some by mistake – the country has become full of hungry ferrets, stoats, weasels, rats, cats, dogs, hedgehogs and possums. The kākāpō had lost the power of flight because it had nothing to fly away from (it was ‘ecologically naïve’) and it was completely unprepared for the onslaught. A frightened kākāpō simply freezes, relying on its cryptic mottled green colouration to hide, which is utterly hopeless when the predators are mammals hunting by smell. The females build their nests at ground level, and must also leave their eggs and chicks alone while



This flightless nocturnal parrot is clinging on to survival

they are feeding, which makes them particularly vulnerable.

Was the kākāpō ever hunted?

Yes. It was hunted heavily for its red meat and feathers (which were woven into soft, valuable cloaks). Meanwhile, it became a ‘scientific curiosity’ in the 19th century and, reprehensively, thousands were killed or captured for museums, zoos and private collectors worldwide. Habitat clearance for farming was another significant threat.

How rare is the kākāpō?

The population hit an all-time low of just 51 birds in 1995. Thanks to remarkable and groundbreaking conservation efforts, though, the current population is 235 (May 2026). The species is still teetering on the brink, but its population has increased nearly five-fold. All the survivors are wild, and there are none in captivity.

What has helped the turnaround?

Efforts to help protect the birds began in 1894, but there was little success until the late 1980s. Crucially, all the surviving kākāpō were transferred to newly predator-free offshore islands: Little Barrier, Codfish, Maud and, most recently, Chalky and Anchor Islands. These manageable safe havens hide away the birds for safekeeping.

Do the birds fend for themselves?

Far from it. The survival of the kākāpō depends on intensive intervention at every stage of its life. This involves moving birds between islands, closely monitoring their eggs and chicks with infrared video cameras, rescuing and hand-rearing any poorly chicks, and giving them extra food. Every kākāpō carries a radio transmitter and is painstakingly monitored year-round.

What about Sirocco?

Sirocco is undoubtedly the most famous of all the kākāpō. Born on Codfish Island in 1997, he was raised by humans before being released into the wild – and has always preferred his human friends to his kākāpō compatriots. While I was filming for the BBC in 2009, Sirocco famously climbed up my leg and back, using his beak and claws like mountaineers use axes and crampons, and began rocking backwards and forwards on my head. The clip of me being shagged by a rare parrot was featured on news bulletins around the world and, embarrassingly, has been watched on YouTube millions of times.

But it made Sirocco famous. He was given his own Facebook page and Twitter account and, in 2010, was appointed official Spokesbird for Conservation by the New Zealand Prime Minister. While it was obviously tongue-in-cheek, Sirocco's appointment and all the publicity that it has generated has helped to highlight the plight of the still Critically Endangered kākāpō. 🐦

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