

Kea: Bird of Paradox

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Kea: Bird of Paradox.—Judy Diamond and Alan B. Bond. 1999. University of California Press. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California. xiii + 230 pp., 1 color + 28 b/w illustrations, 3 maps, 14 tables. ISBN 0-520-21339-4. Cloth, \$29.95.—The Kea (*Nestor notabilis*), along with many other unique New Zealand birds, has fascinated me during my various visits to New Zealand. Thus it was with curious anticipation that I approached the review of this book.

My appetite was whetted when I thumbed through the review copy. The title is appropriate, because the Kea has been the source of much controversy since the earliest days of the European colonization of New Zealand. The book is compact, well bound, attractively printed in a clean, easy to read format, and the beautiful illustrations by Marc Marcusson immediately caught my eye. These features, along with the attractive dust jacket and intriguing chapter headings, promised much. Unfortunately, the book did not fully live up to my expectations.

From the start it is not clear as to who is the intended audience. Though the book appears to follow scientific format, the serious ornithologist will not find the rigorous approach to science that one would expect in a book that claims to provide “the first comprehensive account of the Kea’s contradictory nature” (p. 2) that will “cast new light on the origins of behavioral flexibility and the problems of species survival in human environments everywhere” (publisher’s press release). This deficiency is apparent in the authors’ lax approach to detail that, frustratingly, permeate the book. For example, does the Kakapo (*Stringops habroptilus*) ever attain the “size of a turkey” (p. 10)? The figures reported for exotic animals introduced by Europeans (p. 41) are surely those for birds alone, and not, as suggested by the authors, for all animals; and what is unusual about a bird that maintains an internal body temperature of 40°C (p.

117)? Further, the system of citation seems needlessly cumbersome. The numbers in the text refer the reader to the notes section (pages 175–200), but in many cases the notes provide authors names and publication dates only. To find the full details of the citation one has to take the added step of searching the reference section (pages 201–222). Finally, there are few references in the text to the tables in Appendix B (pp. 151–174). As a result, one tends to stumble upon them by accident. Even when discovered, I found much of the information in the tables difficult to comprehend. I suspect the lay reader will find their content bewildering.

Given these observations, what of the contents of the book? The introduction provides a useful background to the geography and biological history of New Zealand followed by comments on the Kea’s place in that history and brief outlines of the chapter contents. Nevertheless, I question the authors’ biased claims for the Kea, for example that it is “the most extraordinary animal” in New Zealand’s fauna (p. 2), and that it shows “more elaborate and extensive play behavior than any other bird” (p. 4).

Chapters 1, 2, and 6 are the most informative. In Chapter 1 (“The Moa’s Legacy”), the authors provide a good insight into prehistoric New Zealand, the forces that shaped it and gave rise to its unique, bird-dominated fauna. That sets the stage for the discussion of Kea evolution that concludes the chapter. In Chapter 2 (“From Relict to Renegade”), we learn of the Maori and European occupation of New Zealand. Both waves of settlement had a profound impact on New Zealand and resulted in the devastation of much of its biological uniqueness, including its sad litany of extinctions. Surprisingly, despite this human-induced perturbation the Kea survived. The authors attribute that survival to the Kea’s adaptability as an “open-program” species. Yet it is that adaptability that brought the Kea into conflict with the new settlers and their sheep and gave rise to the concerns that led to its persecution. That persecution is well described and substantiated by some astonishing figures of Kea slaughter. Chapter 6 (“From Bounties to Black Markets”) continues the discussion begun in Chapter 2. As a result, there is some needless duplication of information. Nevertheless, the revelations of the continuing illegal persecution of the Kea provide a valuable lesson on the problems surrounding the international bird trade. The concluding section on population estimates is not reassuring and gives cause for concern for the long-term future of this fascinating bird.

The real substance of the book lies in chapters 3 (“Hanging Out with the Gang”) and 4 (“Growing and Learning”). It is here that the authors state the importance of their four-year study and its contribution to understanding the uniqueness of Kea behavior, particularly play. I found neither chapter to be convincing. That is unfortunate because there is a

wealth of valuable observational material here. However, I found myself questioning the interpretation of many of the described behaviors and wondering why the authors chose to publish so many new findings (see tables in Appendix B) in this book rather than in the primary literature where it would have stood the test of peer review. Both chapters raise many questions as to the validity of the methods used to analyze, quantify, and define Kea behaviors, for example though the authors claim that the playfulness of the Kea is unique (pp. 69–79), they never define play and how it can be measured. Further, the language used in both chapters is often imprecise and value laden, for example, how can the authors be sure that “not all birds have as much to learn as Keas” (p. 95)?

Chapter 5 (“The Prince and the Pauper”) focuses largely on the biology of the Kaka (*Nestor meridionalis*), the Kea’s closest relative. Ostensibly this chapter is included for comparative purposes to help better understand the origins of Kea behavior. Although some useful comparisons are made between the two species, much of the content is based on studies of the Kaka on Kapiti Island. Fascinating though those studies may be, I wonder about the amount of space given to them in a book on the Kea.

Despite my criticisms, I enjoyed reading this book. The authors’ writing style makes their tale appealing and easy to read. Given its reasonable cost and its attractive format, I suspect the book will appeal to a general audience with an interest in the biology of New Zealand. However, for the reasons given, I suspect the more critical audience will find this book wanting. Despite its claims, I am still waiting for the definitive book on the Kea.—ALEX L. A. MIDDLETON, 61 Forest Street, Guelph, Ontario N1G 1J2, Canada. E-mail: smiddlet@uoguelph.ca
