

Karearea Nesting in the Regional Park

Karearea, New Zealand falcons, are endemic, and nationally about as rare as Kiwi, but they seem to like Wellington, and Eastbourne in particular. Most years have seen one or two breeding pairs in the East Harbour Regional Park, and others are often present at Zealandia, Belmont Regional Park, and the forested fringes of Upper Hutt. They can nest in a rudimentary 'scrape' on the ground, or more safely in trees. All six of the Eastbourne nests I've seen were in clumps of *Astelia*; two in trees and four on the ground.

Inconveniently, a pair have recently decided to nest on the ground, very close to York Bay's Kaitawa Track. Two previous nesting attempts on the same site have had limited success; both started with three eggs, with one chick raised in 2011, and the nest abandoned with unhatched eggs in 2016. Three more remote nests, two of them in trees, have successfully raised two young each, so it's difficult not to conclude that proximity to the track is an issue.

The trouble with Karearea is that they are extraordinarily aggressive, especially in defence of nests and young. Anyone passing by will be flown at, often with a loud, shrill 'Tsee Tsee Tsee' warning call, but sometimes a shockingly silent first strike, and sometimes striking the head, hard and painfully, drawing blood. Utterly fearless, these birds will attack deer and dogs in similar style. They have a worldwide reputation as the fiercest of falcons, despite being far from biggest; an early scientific name was 'Falco ferox'.

They take live prey, mostly small to medium birds, but as large as young hares, pheasants, and Paradise Shelducks. Over Eastbourne they can often be heard as they attack passing Kahu, Swamp harriers, a much bigger bird, whose only defence is to move off smartly whilst rolling on their back to present their talons, as the Karearea 'dive bomb' them! While Kahu are about the size of a Black Backed gull, Karearea are close to Red Billed gull size. The two can also be distinguished by their flight: Kahu tend to soar with occasional slow flapping; Karearea fly fast, with rapid wingbeats, and only soar on windy days over the hills.

Their very fearlessness is often their undoing: young birds have about 50% mortality in their first year. They are caught trying to take domestic chooks, and are vulnerable when eating their prey on the ground in suburban settings. Other hazards are uninsulated power transformers, glass balustrades (especially the frameless ones), shooting by protective chook and pigeon keepers (highly illegal), car strike, and predation, particularly by cats, while on the nest at night.

We can help them out in several ways. Keeping away from their nest sites as much as possible means they won't waste time and energy defending when they need to be incubating. It also saves the intruder from receiving bleeding scalp wounds, or at the very least loss of hat or loss of balance on a steep track. In the case of the above-mentioned nest, there is an alternative track of similar length and difficulty, the Waterfall Track, so walkers will be diverted to that route. MIRO and ERAT are doing excellent work on predatory pest control in the Regional Park, no doubt accounting in part for the popularity of the area for breeding Karearea. Cats, both feral and domestic, are a harder one to address. They are probably as big a threat to ground nests as is human disturbance. Whilst they can be trapped, and feral ones killed, trail camera footage shows that domestic cats roam widely. Keeping your cat inside at night goes a long way to mitigating this threat; Karearea are easily able to drive off a cat in daylight.

We will be remotely monitoring this site day and night in the hope of identifying risks to breeding. All going well, the young should be flying by Xmas, and relatively safe, though their parents will still vigorously defend their patch. Whilst we may be unable to prevent disturbance or predation, we hope to find ways to minimise it in future.

These are rare and spectacular birds. They have been in New Zealand for millennia, so present little threat to other native fauna. They live nowhere else. Let's treat them with the respect they deserve.



Defending female Karearea. Astelia nest plant behind.

Richmond Atkinson, York Bay.