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High Country Lark

An Invitation to Paradise By Neville Peat

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Chapter 2 – Sugarloaf Pass

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‘A very curious circumstance’

‘Mr Buchanan, of the Geological Survey, has mentioned to me a very curious circumstance frequently observed by himself at Otago: he has seen these birds travelling through the bush on foot, Indian fashion, sometimes as many as twenty of them in single file, passing rapidly over the ground by a succession of hops, and following their leader like a flock of sheep; for, if the first bird should have occasion to leap over a stone or fallen tree in the line of march, every bird in the procession follows suit accordingly!’

From Sir Walter Buller’s notes on South Island kōkako,
A History of the Birds of New Zealand, 1888

AROUND SEVEN O’CLOCK in the evening, two days after the 1995 summer solstice, a graduate student from Harvard University, Cagan Sekercioglu, who is of Turkish descent, crossed the swing-bridge at the start of the Routeburn Track from the

Glenorchy end, and set off at a brisk pace for the camping spot at Routeburn Flats. He was alone. The weather was clear, the light good.

He had hiked about a quarter of an hour and was close to the second swing-bridge, which crosses Sugarloaf Stream, when he saw a bird close to the track, low down. It was about twenty metres away. A bird biologist and wildlife photographer, Cagan knew he was looking at something different to what the guidebooks told him to expect in these southern forests. The bird, a dark-grey shape in the twilight, made no sound, and the forest itself was quiet. As he reached for his binoculars, the bird moved further away from the track. But it stayed within his line of sight and he got a clear view of it for a few moments before it was gone.

‘When I first saw it,’ Cagan wrote in an ‘incident report’ for the Department of Conservation a few days later, ‘I thought it was a huia.’ But then he remembered huia were extinct, and anyway, they were North Island birds. The reason he thought of huia first was because of the ‘prominent orange wattles’ on the bird (huia had orange wattles, as do South Island kōkako). He’d already seen saddlebacks, a related wattle bird, on his travels in New Zealand and knew he wasn’t looking at a saddleback. It had to be a South Island kōkako, the only other possibility among the ancient family of New Zealand wattle birds. He knew it was rare if not extinct. It was, he wrote, using the scientific name for the family, ‘definitely a callaeid’.

Cagan continued on to the Routeburn Flats, pitched his tent there and wondered what to do about what he’d just seen. When I contacted him several years later, by which time he had a Ph.D. from Stanford University in the causes and consequences of bird extinctions in tropical countries, and was working as a bird conservation specialist with a long list of projects to his name, he recalled having doubts about whether he should report the Sugarloaf Stream sighting. He was worried he might be regarded as an attention-seeking ‘stringer’ – a foreigner to boot. ‘Stringer’ is an American term for a birdwatcher who fakes sightings of rare birds.

In the end, his conscience was tweaked. He decided that he couldn’t ignore the conservation implications of not reporting a kōkako in the Routeburn area. Moreover, he would have felt, as he put it, ‘very guilty not mentioning it’. After completing the Routeburn tramp he contacted the Department of Conservation office in Dunedin, the

government agency responsible for protecting endangered species, and wrote out the incident report. Cagan had come to New Zealand at the end of a three-month project in the World Heritage rainforest of the Atherton Tablelands, Northern Queensland, and returned to the United States to continue his studies and an international career in bird conservation.

The 1995 Sugarloaf Stream sighting is significant. For a start, it is relatively recent in the sketchy history of the species, reports of which pepper the records of rare-bird sightings through the last half of the twentieth century. The Department of Conservation (DOC) believes the South Island kōkako is gone for good. In January 2007, a DOC report stated there had been ‘no confirmed sightings for forty-five years’.

That statement is questionable. The pivotal word is ‘confirmed’. There have been numerous ‘sightings’ (but no photographs of sufficient clarity) and reports of distinctive calls in recent decades. Although there hasn’t been enough evidence to convince the classifiers of threatened species at the Department, applying the designation ‘Extinct’ is a big call.

Of several reliable sightings in recent decades, a stand-out is the report by a deerstalker, K. McBride, of two sightings in successive years, 1966-67, in the same area of the little-visited Tiel Valley near Makarora, north of Lake Wanaka. In May 1966, the hunter saw a kōkako on a branch at the edge of beech forest. He reported ‘putty coloured’ wattles and a black face. ‘One could imagine it wearing a mask,’ he said. The second sighting, in April 1967, was of a kōkako walking along a sloping log: ‘. . . it climbed the trunk in a most peculiar way. With each rather ungainly step upwards, it appeared to hold on to the bark with its beak, take a look at me, take another step . . . till it reached branches, when it hopped rapidly out of sight.’ Several years later, an expedition that included officers from the Wildlife Service and the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR) Ecology Division failed to locate any birds.

More recently, through the 1980s and 1990s, sporadic sightings or calls indicative of kōkako have been reported from the Wakatipu region – from the valleys bounding the Head of the Lake, the Greenstone, Caples, Routeburn, Earnslaw Burn and Rees. A

scatter of reports – sightings, calls and kōkako-like moss grubblings, first noticed in the Tiel Valley incidents – emanated from expeditions made into the Upper Caples in 1983-84 by a group of dedicated ornithologists, including Peter Child and Rhys Buckingham. They knew what to listen and look out for. Other reports were from people without an educated eye or ear for kōkako but who clearly heard, and sometimes saw, something unusual. Cagan Sekercioglu sighting near Sugarloaf Stream falls somewhere between ‘expert’ and ‘non-expert’. Although he was a student at the time, his experience and academic achievements have since multiplied, and no one would deny his credibility now.

In all, the evidence points to the real possibility that kōkako, in very small numbers and widely distributed, were surviving in forests at the Head of the Lake towards the turn of the century. [...]