

By Donna Falconer

Sky Hunter -

KĀREAREA, THE NZ FALCON

As with most people who have encountered the Kārearea (our native NZ falcon), I have been left in awe at their aerial mastery and the command they hold over the challenging high-country environment they make home. It is timely to raise awareness of these majestic birds so that people have a greater understanding of the threats they face.

Since shifting to the Mackenzie Basin, I've had many encounters with the Kārearea, including a peek into the lives of two breeding pairs from the Ben Ohau Range. I'd heard many stories of the vigorous and fearless nest defence that the Kārearea is renowned for, one of which involved a SAR exercise up at Mt Cook being abandoned because of a Kārearea persistently dive-bombing the Iroquois helicopter in the exercise. Hence, it was with some trepidation (and a bike helmet) that I first headed off to locate a scrape (nest) with chicks I'd been told about.

About 500m out from the scrape, I heard the first alarm call go off and soon noticed a bird tracking my progress from the ridgeline above me. At some point about 30-40m out from the scrape, I crossed an invisible line and with much 'kekking' from both parents they launched from their respective perches and into their nest defence routines. Splitting up was a cunning plan on their behalf, as I had two birds and two quite different attack approaches and styles to contend with. The female would make full use of the available topography by launching from her perch only to disappear into the gully and then suddenly erupt over the brow of the knob, 3-4 m away from me and at eye level.

This was quite some introduction to being up close and personal with a Kārearea. Her *modus operandi* was pure 'shock and awe', at which she was a master with her contour flying and no holds barred approach. Whether or not she struck you depended on her mood, regardless however, with her eyes locked firmly on yours, her approach was always unwaveringly direct. She was just as capable of lifting off a snugly-fitting cap (without you even feeling it) as she was hitting you at full force and nearly knocking you off balance if you are on uneven ground.

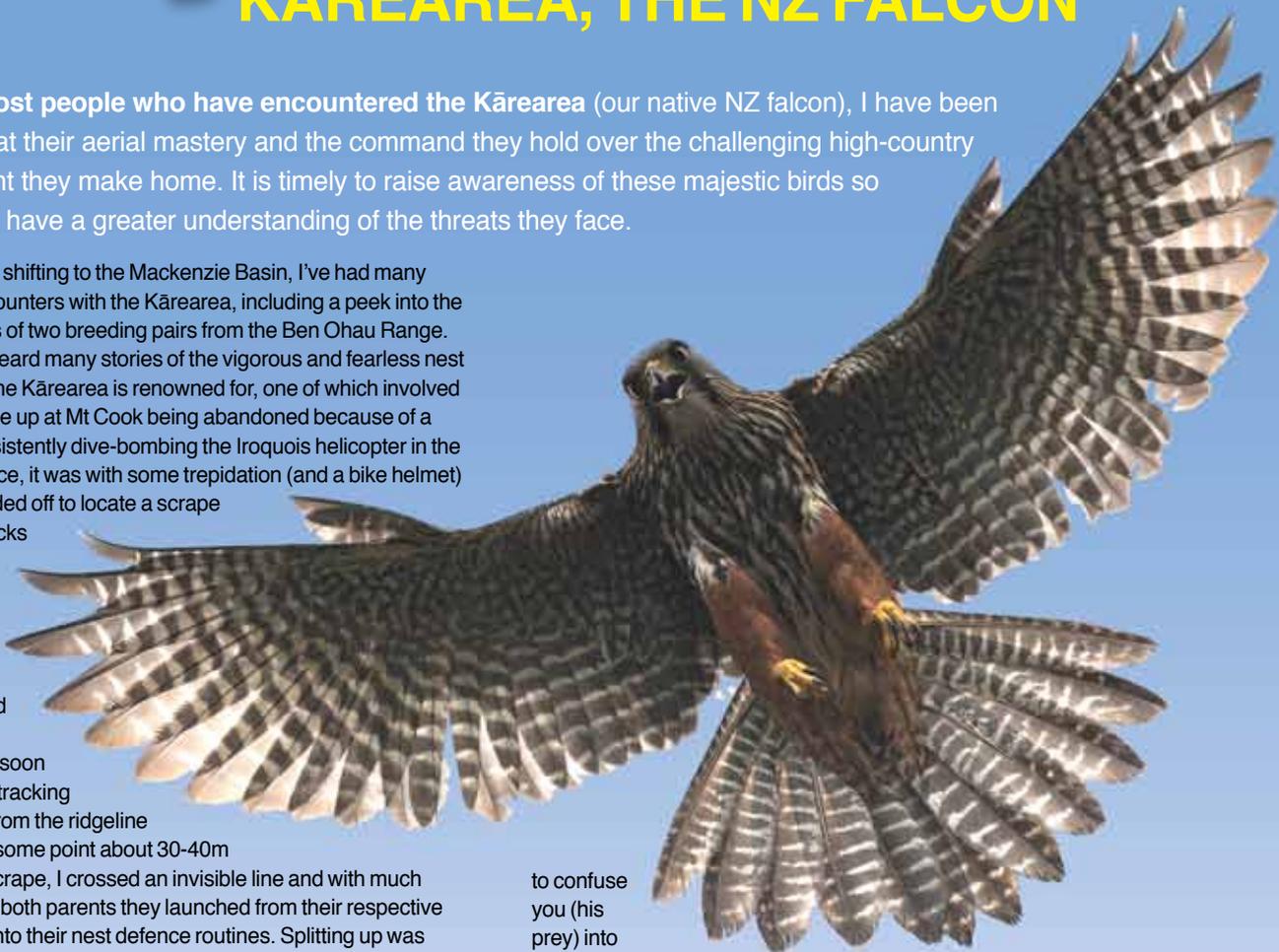
Unlike the female, the male tends to remain in full view during his attack approaches which are mostly low to moderately-angled stoop dives. His flying typically involves lots of fancy flared turns and hovering overhead at the bottom of his low-angle stoops. The male is the master shape shifter of the two, and would execute the most fantastic aerobic displays in his attacking routines. In some dives he would rock from side to side, presumably in an attempt

to confuse you (his prey) into immobility.

Also though, to turn his head even slightly would compromise his aerodynamic form. It seemed to me that part of his role in their combined nest defence routine was to distract you with his flying skills, as being mesmerised by his incredible aerial displays of course leaves you wide open to attack from the lethal weapon that is his contour-flying counterpart. It is easy to become oblivious to the fact that they mean business and will hit you. A sharp jolt to the head however tends to snap you back to the reality that this isn't a private air show, but that they really do just want you out of their territory.

On one extraordinary occasion the male came from altitude and went into a free-fall dive in which he hyper-streamlined his body to reduce drag. With his wings tucked right in and plummeting vertically straight down onto me, at the last moment he pulled into a barrel roll and peeled off. Reminiscent of an F1-11 with its wings in and afterburner on, excepting in a vertical dive rather than level flight, this really is something spectacular to witness, especially from the perspective of being his target! Needless to say, photographing such a missile is next to impossible.

Given the topography, two different birds, two different shadows





Above: Donna Falconer fine tuning the trail camera placement.
Top: The spectacular beauty of the NZ falcon is evident in this image.

The females *modus operandi* is pure 'shock and awe', at which she was a master with her contour flying and no holds barred approach

(if it was sunny) and all the noise, it was a challenge to keep track of the attack circuit of one bird, let alone two. As if that wasn't enough, the male had a propensity for disappearing into the sun, only to launch his attacks from that angle, thereby blinding you. Another very cunning and effective tactic. As well as vigorously defending their nesting territory from ground intruders, aerial invaders such as occasional seagulls, hawks or parries are swiftly dealt with for transgressing over boundary ridgelines and violating falcon airspace.

The female is roughly one third larger than the male, so as far as missiles go, not only is she the more aggressive tactician, she is the more lethal in every respect. It was interesting to witness a number of 'domestics' between one pair in which I wasn't the only one on the receiving end of her displeasure. Their vocalisations during these episodes were hilarious to listen to and luckily for him,

he could easily outfly her. On one occasion she actually attacked him knocking him off his perch – I could only wonder at what transgression he'd made. Given the events that transpired later in the season (i.e. she ate her chick and then abandoned the scrape) – I suspect she had a few issues.

After the drama that is invariably involved in actually getting to a scrape, the sleeping fluff-balls that are in residence in first couple of weeks are fairly unremarkable. Initially chicks are covered in white down that changes to grey in colour. Chicks double their weight roughly every 3-6 days. During the development of their flight feathers, they (wing and tail feathers) were growing at a rate of 1cm a day. Once the chicks became mobile they generally remain close to the scrape outcrop, but if disturbed they are capable of running off and hiding.

Very young chicks are fed (by the female) predominantly on nestlings and young hares and rabbits, along with small birds, lizards and the odd dragon fly. It was noted last season on Xmas day they dined in fine style on chukar and had it twice more before New Year. I was suitably impressed that their food choices went more up-market over the festive season! Depending on flying conditions, they can catch and carry prey up to 6-8 times their own body weight. Interestingly, large dragon flies found in the scrape showed no puncture marks to the wings or body, which is testament to the precision hunting that the falcon is renowned for.

Chicks fledge at approximately 35-38 days old and don't decamp from the scrape until the last chick has fledged. Newly fledged Kārearea are relatively easy to locate as, like many teenagers, their incessant whingeing and bickering can be heard long before you spot them. Up on the ridgeline where



three fledglings had decamped to, all hell would break loose as a parent flew by with food with all three fledglings launching from their perches to give chase and try to be the lucky one to score something. Such 'fly by's' are highly entertaining as it is a spectacular sight to see all the birds in the air at the same time as well as witnessing food drops or food transfers between a parent and the fledglings.

The teenage behaviour of fledglings rapidly regresses into general shenanigans that involves things other than themselves. Finding life boring on a ridge top, they decamped again to run amok around the station homestead at Ferintosh where there was a little more action. Chooks and house cats were fair game as they practised their hunting skills in the house

a cocked head, it would have a 'well that took you long enough' look on its face. Whilst not quite in the league of keas with their propensity for frivolity, it was great to see the fledglings had a wicked sense of humour.

In the mountains you may observe the Kārearea out flying for fun (rather than hunting), especially in very strong winds or gales and especially along ridge fronts where there is a lot of free lift. In a good gale you may find an adult pair doing aerobatics rather than slope soaring which really is a sight to behold. Fledglings/juveniles will often be seen slope soaring along ridge tops of ridge fronts as they practice their flying and hunting skills.

Given that eggs or nestlings are found in a scrape directly on the ground as can be imagined they hardly stand a chance if predators such as wild cats or mustelids are around. As determined and feisty as Kārearea are in their nest defence, should a scrape be invaded in the middle of the night, the odds of the adult birds successfully repelling a ground invader



Top: Incoming!
Left: Tucker time!

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are most likely slim as aerial rather than ground combat is their specialty.

So a call from the Kārearea to all those who frequent our wild places: if you see cats and mustelids, please shoot them - you'll be doing our Kārearea (and all native bird) populations an immense favour. Have something above your head as protection and move rapidly through the zone being defended. The Kārearea is

paddocks. It was at this stage that the fledglings displayed a high level of intelligence and sense of humour. This had previously been demonstrated when they would attempt to push each other off roofs and fly tag circuits around the chimneys. After hearing that they'd been particularly badly behaved I would arrive to photograph these shenanigans only to have all three birds disappear into trees and not utter a peep or even move. After an hour or so of this silent treatment I would give up and leave - only to have them appear as soon as I got in my car in which they would fly circuits around me as I was driving off. This happened a number of times. Other times a bird would sneak up in stealth mode and perch behind me waiting for me to turn around and discover it. With

a fully protected bird and the days of them being shot because of their nuisance value are hopefully well and truly behind us.

Through my photography of these majestic birds, I wish to raise awareness of the eastern falcon which inhabits the high country of Canterbury and Otago so that back country users can help eradicate predators that threaten the breeding success of our Kārearea. It is my aim to establish a trust for the purpose of furthering research into the eastern falcon and promoting their conservation. If anyone is interested in supporting the establishment of such a trust, please contact me (falconer.dm@clear.net.nz) or you can check out my website (www.nzfalcon.net.nz) to see many more Kārearea images.

