



Kea Call

by *Mellisa Pascale*

I hardly noticed when the train started moving. It was the shift of the outside landscape that tipped me off, rather than motion beneath my feet. Gradually, the saw-like range on the horizon, a seeming impenetrable wall, loomed nearer and nearer. Then we conquered the last flat plains of east Canterbury, entering the Southern Alps through a series of steep-sided vales.

As the train wound its way through ravine and over river, I went to the open car to gawk more directly. Until then, the South Island’s mountains had been a silhouette on the horizon while I renegaded to the coast, hopping from beach town to beach town and lugging hiking boots that hadn’t seen much action yet. I was two months into an open-ended backpacking trip, hovering on the edge, hesitant to dive in and see where the journey would take me. In the open car, it was so crowded that it was difficult to move, and a lot of hair, hands, and faces made their way into in my photos. But I remember the intended subjects: the mineral blue Waimakariri River, sharp inclines fuzzed with brush, the back of the train tailing behind on curves. The cool wind of the moving train dispersed any late summer heat, and everything that I knew about New Zealand thus far, as we tugged into the train station at Arthur’s Pass Village.

Arthur’s Pass, which was the name of both the village and its surrounding national park, owed its beauty to movement. The collision of the Pacific and Indo-Australian plates had coerced mountains out of the earth while withdrawn glaciers had etched bowl-shaped grooves between peaks. From the village—a smattering of baches and compact buildings that didn’t include a grocery store—green valley walls rose to the east and west, tapering into unseen summits somewhere up in the partly-cloudy sky. One of those mountains was Avalanche Peak, the object of my voyage to Arthur’s Pass. A 1,100-meter ascent from town, Avalanche Peak was a popular one-day tramping route, with challenging terrain and attractive views of the region. It would be my inaugural New Zealand tramping track, but as it would take eight hours to complete round-trip, and it was already nearly noon, I planned to try it the next day.

After dropping my backpack at my Airbnb, I spent the first day roaming shorter tracks, donning a jacket for the chilly March air. One dirt trail led through a silver-trunked beech forest to a waterfall named Devils Punchbowl, tumbling from its source in a hanging valley above to the rocky basin below. Through my camera lens, I contemplated the new terrain. Gone were the rocky beaches and undulating ocean waves, replaced with a liquid skyscraper sourced from the South Island’s ragged spine. I focused on the basin, where the steep bowl collecting the falls shrouded its snow globe dimension partially in shadow. With the spray of water misting my face, I noticed how the steady rumble of the falls mingled with the high-pitched timbre of an unknown bird, hidden somewhere in the dark green canopy above. There were so many unknowns at that moment—about how I’d fare on Avalanche Peak tomorrow, how things would go beyond that. When I’d bought a one-way ticket to New Zealand, I hadn’t imagined being so plagued by uncertainty and anxiousness. I’d thought it would feel light to move around with nothing but a backpack, liberating to follow my own agenda, but instead I found myself searching for something solid to grasp onto, like a clear path into the clouds.

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The Airbnb was hosted by a woman named Kate, a short, outgoing Kiwi who liked to listen to The Chicks and Pink Floyd while gardening. That first evening, Kate generously made dinner—pasta Bolognese—for me and her visiting friend, Mark, who was a volunteer kea conservationist from Christchurch. I hadn’t seen the kea yet, but I’d heard of them. The birds’ reputation as the “clown of the alps” preceded them. After the waterfall, I’d gone to the DoC center and browsed rows of postcards, one of which had a photo of a kea nibbling a backpack with the words “A trampler’s pack – the staple diet of a kea” printed below. On the postcard, the bird had looked like a smaller hawk with green feathers, emerald on the wings and the hue of water-choked grass on the body. But kea aren’t hawks—they’re alpine parrots, which I could only have met in New Zealand’s Southern Alps.

Over a century ago, Australian mountaineer Freda Du Faur encountered the kea during her escapades in a region south of Arthur’s Pass. Du Faur was the first woman to climb New Zealand’s highest peak, called Aoraki by Māori and Mount Cook by European colonists. During that same triumphant 1910 mountaineering season, she invited her friend Muriel Cadogan (who would become or might have already been her partner) to visit and see the sights. While attempting a quiet night together beneath a full moon and the alps’ spikey silhouettes, Du Faur begrudgingly noticed that she and Muriel were not alone. In her book, *The Conquest of Mount Cook and Other Climbs; an Account of Four Seasons’ Mountaineering on the Southern Alps of New Zealand*, she said,

“One [kea] would gravely sit down opposite us and stare steadily for a few minutes with his head on one side and an air of incredible wisdom. Then he would advance with ridiculous sideling hops and make a dig at the nails in our boots, whose brightness no doubt attracted him. Not content with our boots he would hop right on to us if we lay still and pluck at anything with his strong, sharp beak...We found it impossible to do more than scare the birds a couple of yards away, and then they always returned as soon as we lay quiet. To open your eyes suddenly and stare into the inscrutable face of a parrot who is sitting only about a foot from you...is most uncanny.”

I would learn that kea antics went well beyond tormenting travelers like Du Faur. The mischievous parrots also took a perverse pleasure in tearing stuff up: the rubber bits around car windows, bike seats, backpacks, and—when they had a hankering for mutton fat—sheep.

“There was a bounty on the kea,” Mark said over dinner. He ate voraciously, but he also seemed thrilled to have a listener, and as such his mouth couldn’t decide which of these competing interests was more important. For a moment, the kea won out. “They were killing too many sheep, so the government said, *y’know, we’ll pay you if you kill a kea.*” He looked down at his pasta. “And then, of course, they killed too many.”

While today kea are likened to clowns, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries they were villainized. As European colonists imposed their society and environment on the strange contours of New Zealand—a realm ruled by birds and nearly devoid of mammals, save for a few native bat species and the dogs and rats that had been brought during the Māori migration in the thirteenth century—imported sheep became a reliable source of food and wool for trading. Sheep would have been easy to maintain in a setting untouched by large predators, until the plucky kea started getting creative. Geoff Norman, author of *Birdstories: A History of the Birds of New Zealand*, describes “sheep in the Wanaka area being attacked by kea, who perched on their backs and used their powerful beaks to peck through the flesh to the kidney area.”

Unsurprisingly, few sheep survived such an ordeal.

The kea bounty began in the 1860s, and during its century-long existence, one hundred and fifty thousand kea were killed. DoC estimates that three to seven thousand remained today, making the species nationally endangered. Over the weekend, Mark planned to climb Avalanche Peak and band the birds as part of the Kea Database Project, a citizen-led program that tracked kea movement and numbers. Though no longer hunted, kea still faced threats, the most pressing being mammalian predators introduced during European colonization. Stoats, possums, cats, and sometimes rats preyed on kea or pinched eggs from their nests, usually constructed among tree roots at ground level. Most of the indigenous birds—like the national mascot, the kiwi—were in the same predicament. Essentially, if something had been birthed alive rather than hatched from an egg, it was most likely causing a problem. That could include humans, too.

“Well, here comes Wayne,” Kate said. From the house next door, a wrinkled man with white hair carefully traversed the grass between his home and Kate’s. He stopped at the table as Mark polished off the pasta Bolognese.

“What’s for dinner?” Wayne asked.

“Pasta Bolognese,” Kate said.

“Huh. And who are you?” he asked, looking at me. I told him I was traveling. “I took in a couple of travelers last night,” he said. “Just left this morning. They were gonna camp out over there”—he gestured toward the western side of the valley—“but it was raining, so I told ‘em to come on in. They liked my flatmates.” At this, he smiled and shifted his gaze back to his house. On the roof, three green blobs hopped about.

Wayne stood there expectantly, like a child showing off a new toy. Mark didn’t say anything. Eventually, Kate said, “Yup, we’ll come over to see your kea after we get cleaned up here, Wayne.”

“Alright, alright. Just thought I’d let you know I’m here.” At that, Wayne made his way back to his house.

Outside the café where Kate worked, there was a sign that read, “Please don’t feed the kea.” Other than inviting begging habits and discouraging this highly intelligent bird from foraging on its own, kea and humans simply didn’t share the same diet (save for the occasional lamb, I guess). Wayne evidently didn’t adhere to this policy. After we finished dinner and cleaned the dishes, the three of us walked over to his house. On the way, Mark said, “I could report him, but he always throws a hundred toward the project when I visit. He just really, really loves the birds.”

As if on cue, Wayne burst through his front door and tossed pieces of bread up on the low roof while the green blobs unfolded their wings, revealing striking red-orange feathers beneath, and scrambled for the scraps. When we approached, they hopped to the edge and peered inquisitively at us. Kea can be quite brainy; in 2017, a study conducted at Willowbank Wildlife Reserve revealed that they were able to coordinate and work in groups. Perhaps these three were working together on Wayne.

Despite declaring that he was okay with Wayne’s feeding habits, Mark was tight-lipped in the moment. I thought it must be a tough balance for conservationists to strike. How much interaction with wildlife did humans require to start caring? How much interaction could a kea take before their vibrant personalities, the instinct to hunt or that fearless curiosity, was dampened by human intrusion?

Suddenly, one of Wayne’s roommates emitted the call I’d heard earlier at the waterfall. It lingered, high and sharp, like how I would imagine the sound of a small meteor flying by. The kea got its name from this call, and it’s one Māori name that wasn’t given a European version by the colonists. Kate, a part-time photographer and videographer, aimed her DSLR at one of the kea, and he pecked her lens. Without thinking, I reached out my hand so one could nibble on my finger and noticed everyone around me tense up. A powerful beak clamped on while I internally screamed and imagined life sans an index.

The New Zealand Government has a plan to eradicate select introduced predators (stoats, rats, and possums) by 2050, using a combination of tools like trapping and 1080 poisoning. Still, kea and other native birds would have to compete with the remaining introduced species for food. Human settlements would continue to encroach on habitats. More recently, lead poisoning had become an issue for kea, whose inquisitive nature drove them to poke at old buildings. But I didn’t know any of that yet as I watched their green wings unfold on Wayne’s roof in Arthur’s Pass. A glimpse of fire flashed underneath as they soared up and away in the fading summer light.

Mellisa Pascale is a writer from southeastern Pennsylvania. Her essays and poetry have appeared in Elsewhere Journal, City Creatures Blog, Moss Puppy Magazine, and other publications. She holds an M.A. in Writing from Johns Hopkins University and is studying for her M.Phil. in Medieval Language and Literature at Trinity College Dublin.